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gods and heroes of the ancient world



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Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh focuses on the eponymous hero of the world's oldest epic and his legendary adventures. However, it also goes further and examines the significance of the story's Ancient Near Eastern context, and what it tells us about notions of kingship, animality, and the natures of mortality and immortality.

In this volume, Louise M. Pryke provides a unique perspective to consider many foundational aspects of Mesopotamian life, such as the significance of love and family, the conceptualisation of life and death, and the role of religious observance. The final chapter assesses the powerful influence of Gilgamesh on later works of ancient literature, from the Hebrew Bible, to the *Odyssey*, to *The Tales of the Arabian Nights*, and his reception through to the modern era.

Gilgamesh is an invaluable tool for anyone seeking to understand this fascinating figure, and more broadly, the relevance of Near Eastern myth in the classical world and beyond.

Louise M. Pryke is a Lecturer for the Languages and Literature of Ancient Israel at Macquarie University, Australia, and a Research Associate at the University of Sydney. *Gilgamesh* is her second volume in the Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World series. Her first book for the series, *Ishtar*, explored the world's first goddess of love.

Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World

Series editor: Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, London, UK

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Gilgamesh



Louise M. Pryke

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pryke, Louise M., author.

Title: Gilgamesh / Louise M. Pryke.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Gods and heroes of the ancient world | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018054362 (print) | LCCN 2018060068 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781315716343 (ebook) | ISBN 9781317506713 (web pdf) |

ISBN 9781317506706 (epub) | ISBN 9781317506690 (mobi/kindle) |

ISBN 9781138860698 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315716343 (ebk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Gilgamesh. | Gilgamesh (Legendary character) | Epic poetry, Assyro-Babylonian—History and criticism. | Heroes in literature. | Civilization, Assyro-Babylonian. | Iraq—Civilization—To 634.

Classification: LCC PJ3771.G6 (ebook) | LCC PJ3771.G6 P79 2019

(print) | DDC 892/.1–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018054362>

ISBN: 978-1-138-86069-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-71634-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Utopia

by Newgen Publishing UK



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Series foreword

It is proper for a person who is beginning any serious discourse and task to begin first with the gods (Demosthenes, *Epistula* 1.1)

The gods and heroes of antiquity are part of our culture. Many function as sources of creative inspiration for poets, novelists, artists, composers and designers. Greek tragedy's ongoing appeal has ensured a continued familiarity with its protagonists. Even the world of management has used ancient gods as representatives of different styles: Zeus and the "club" culture for example and Apollo and the "role" culture: see C. Handy, *The Gods of Management: Who They Are, How They Work and Why They Fail*, London 1978.

This series is concerned with how and why these figures continue to fascinate. But it has another aim, too, namely to explore their strangeness. The familiarity of the subjects risks observing a vast difference between their modern and ancient meanings and purposes. With certain exceptions, people today do not worship them, yet to the peoples of the ancient world they were venerated as part of pantheon made up of literally hundreds of divine powers. These range from major deities, each of whom might, themselves, be worshipped in specialised guises, to heroes—typically regarded as deceased individuals associated with local communities—to other, though overlapping, forms of beings such as daimones and nymphs. The landscape was dotted with sanctuaries, while natural features such as mountains, trees and rivers could be thought to be inhabited by religious beings. Studying these beings involves finding strategies to comprehend a world where everything could be, in the words of Thales, "full of gods."

To get to grips with this world, it is helpful to try to set aside modern preconceptions of the divine, shaped as they are in large part by Christianised concepts of a transcendent, omnipotent, morally upright God. The ancients worshipped numerous beings who looked, behaved and suffered like humans, but who, as immortals, were not confined to the human condition. Far from being omnipotent, each

had limited powers: even Zeus, the sovereign of the Greek pantheon, could be envisaged sharing control of the cosmos with his brothers Poseidon and Hades. Moreover, ancient polytheism was open to continual reinterpretation, with the result that we should not expect to find figures with a uniform essence. Accounts of the pantheon often begin with a list of major gods and some salient function: Hephaistos/Vulcan: craft; Aphrodite/Venus: love; Artemis/Diana: the hunt, and so forth. But few are this straightforward. Aphrodite, for example, is more than a goddess of love, key though that function is. She is, for instance, *hetaira* (“courtesan”) and *porne* (“prostitute”) but other epithets point to such guises as patronage of the community (*pandemos*: “of all the people”) and protection of seafaring (*euploia*, *pontia*, *limenia*).

Recognising this diversity, the series consists not of biographies of each god or hero—though such have been attempted in the past—but of investigations into their varied aspects within the complex systems of ancient polytheism. Its approach is shaped partly in response to two distinctive patterns in previous research.

In contrast, under the influence of the “Paris School” of J.-P. Vernant and others, the second half of the 20th century saw a shift away from research into particular gods and heroes towards an investigation of the system of which they formed part. This move was fuelled by a conviction that the study of isolated deities could not do justice to the dynamics of ancient religion. Instead, the pantheon came to be envisaged as a logical and coherent network whose various powers were systematically opposed to one another. In a classic study, for example, Vernant argued that the Greek concept of space was consecrated through an opposition between Hestia (the hearth—fixed space) and Hermes (the messenger and traveller—moveable space): *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, London 1983, 127–175. The gods as individual entities were far from neglected however, as may be exemplified by the studies by Vernant, and his colleague M. Detienne, on specific deities including Artemis, Dionysos and Apollo: for example, Detienne’s *Apollon, le couteau en main: une approche expérimentale du polythéisme grec*, Paris, 1998. Since the first volumes of *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World* were published in 2005, the series has been marking out a middle ground between the positions just outlined. While approaching its subjects as unique, if varied, individual entities, the authors pay attention to gods and heroes as powers within a network of religious beings.

In the earlier years, most of the volumes were on classical topics—

and within this, they dealt chiefly with ancient Greek subjects, particularly Greek deities. Now into its second decade, the series continues to deal with gods—and we are expanding our definition of what a “god” denotes to include collectivities such as the Muses. We are also beginning to include a greater range of “heroes” including Achilles and Theseus. Roman subjects will be explored too, starting with Diana. But in the biggest development since the series began, we are now expanding what we mean by the “ancient world” with the inclusion of Near Eastern topics such as Ishtar.

Each volume presents an authoritative, accessible and fresh account of its subject via three main sections. The introduction brings out what is about the figure in question that merits particular attention. This is followed by a central section which explores key themes including—to varying degrees—origins, myth, cult, and representations in literature and art. Since the series was launched, postclassical reception has increasingly moved into the mainstream of classical research and teaching. This confirms me in my thinking about the importance of a final, third, section exploring the “afterlife” of each subject. Each volume includes illustrations pertinent to each subject and, where appropriate, time charts, genealogical tables and maps. An annotated bibliography points the reader towards further scholarship.

For convenience—though with reservations—we adopted the masculine terms “gods” and “heroes” for the series title—although as the Greek *theos* (“god”) could be used of goddesses too this choice does partly reflect ancient usage. I have always suggested that authors might opt for BC/AD rather than BCE/CE as standard practice in Classics and to bring consistency to the series—however, I have never strictly insisted on this. We have gone for Greek spellings of ancient Greek names except for famous Latinised exceptions.

Catherine Bousfield, the editorial assistant until 2004, literally dreamt about the series one night in the early 2000s. Her thoroughness and motivation brought it close to its launch. The former classics editor at Routledge, Richard Stoneman, provided his expertise and support as the series moved through the early stages of commissioning and working with authors. I then had the honour of working with his successor Matt Gibbons during the early years of the series. Amy Davis-Poynter and Elizabeth Risch have been wonderful colleagues in recent years.

Susan Deacy
University of Roehampton, 2017



Acknowledgements

In the epic journey of writing *Gilgamesh* I have been very fortunate to have many wonderful traveling companions, all of whom have provided invaluable support and camaraderie.

On the road from motivation to manuscript, the assistance of several colleagues and friends has proven indispensable. I thank Julia Kindt for her enthusiasm and guidance, and I am grateful for the insights of Eric Csapo and Alastair Blanshard. My former PhD thesis supervisors, Ian Young and Noel Weeks, have provided wonderful guidance in this project, for which I am most grateful. The Sydney University Akkadian Reading Group of 2017, generously facilitated by Noel Weeks, have helped provide a friendly environment for close reading of the SBV of *Gilgamesh*.

I am greatly indebted to Marija Elektra Rodriguez, who has shared her time, expertise, and insight throughout the process of writing this book. I am most thankful for the help of my friends Samantha Grosser, Emma Barlow, and Tom Kennedy. My research assistants from Macquarie University, Eveline Handby, Samuel Khouri, and Paul Statheos, have provided fantastic support and I look forward to following the progress of their scholarly journeys. My thanks as well to Katherine Shead.

While visiting Hebrew University, my research was aided by access to the university library, kindly facilitated by Wayne Horowitz. I very much appreciate the thoughts of Wayne Horowitz, Tzvi Abusch, and Gary M. Beckman; discussions with colleagues at the 2017 RAI in Marburg were extremely useful in developing my appreciation of *Gilgamesh*. Several colleagues have generously shared their work and enriched my thoughts on *Gilgamesh* following the 2017 RAI; my thanks go to Annette Zgoll, Gabriel Gösta, Nili Wazana, and Piotr Steinkellar. The research for this book was greatly aided by the scholarship of Andrew George, and his translation of the epic. Although each individual mentioned here contributed greatly to my understanding of *Gilgamesh*, they should not be held accountable for

mistakes and oversights in this book.

My attendance at the RAI was partly supported through the generosity of the International Association for Assyriology, for which I am very grateful. My research was significantly assisted through having the privilege of access to the Middle Eastern Library at the British Museum, and the archives of the Royal Asiatic Institute in London, and the help of the staff at these institutions, especially Nancy Charley. Access to the Middle Eastern Library was gained with the help of James Fraser.

I would like to thank the Series Editor, Susan Deacy, as well as Amy Laurens, for their enthusiasm and support in extending the Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World Series into the Ancient Near East. I would like to note my appreciation for the guidance of Elizabeth Risch. I am grateful for the advice provided by *Gilgamesh's* anonymous reviewers.

My friends, colleagues, and students at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University have provided encouragement throughout the writing of this book. I would also like to thank Ian Marshall of the University of Sydney, Linton Meagher, and Emily Dylan.

Finally, I thank my family and loved ones, whose companionship I cherish, and who are in my heart wherever the journey may lead.



Why Gilgamesh?

Introduction

Why Gilgamesh?

Gilgamesh is the world's first tragic hero of ancient literature. His story is recounted in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a literary masterpiece from ancient Mesopotamia. The *Epic* centres on the journey of the legendary character of Gilgamesh, a king traditionally described ruling over Uruk around 2700 BCE. The eponymous hero is celebrated in the *Epic* for his exceptional strength, wisdom, bravery, and beauty.

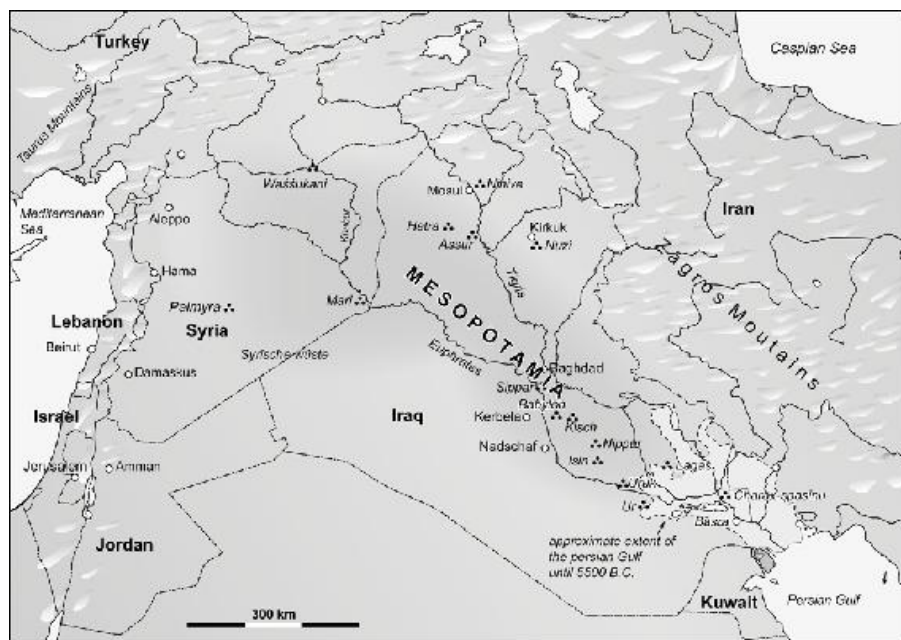


Figure 0.1 Map of Mesopotamia. From *Ishtar*, Louise M. Pryke, Routledge, 2017. Reproduced with permission.

During his legendary journeys, Gilgamesh battles with deities and monsters, and travels to the very edges of the world—and beyond

them. In Mesopotamian myth, he leads armies of men into battle, visits the underworld, and cuts pathways through mountains. In terms of his character, his ambitions, and the challenges he faces, Gilgamesh can only be described in superlative terms. Yet, despite the exceptional quality of Gilgamesh's achievements and characteristics, he remains a very human character, one who experiences the same heartbreaks, limitations, and simple pleasures that shape the universal quality of the human condition. Gilgamesh's epic adventuring, coupled with his human vulnerability, make him a complex and fascinating hero of the ancient world.

The humanity of Gilgamesh, coupled with his mortality, are foundational in his characterisation in ancient myth and epic. Over 4,000 years of history and civilisation have passed from the first known written evidence of Gilgamesh's story to the present, yet his struggles involving life, love, and death remain relevant to modern day audiences—as can be seen in the continued creative remixing of elements from the hero's famous narrative. The study of Gilgamesh provides a focus for exploring the question of what it means to be human, both in the world of ancient Mesopotamian literature, and the present day.

Like Homer's Odysseus, and the legendary Classical hero, Herakles, Gilgamesh's story involves an epic voyage where he battles supernatural opponents. The outsized nature of Gilgamesh's opponents reflects the heroic scale of his adventure, but also the liminal quality of his story. Gilgamesh continually fights his way to the boundaries of his world, and at times, presses far beyond them.

In comparison to his later heroic peers, in place of a journey to find a way home, or a search for redemption, Gilgamesh's story is about the struggle to come to terms with the impermanence of the human condition, a reality underpinning the protagonist's efforts to seek fame, glory, and eternal life. Through his trials and adventures, Gilgamesh discovers two areas of life where meaning and a type of immortality can be found—the legacy of shared human endeavours, and the deep, undying love of his companion, Enkidu.

The combination of fantastical elements with universal concerns has given Gilgamesh's story a lasting and significant impact on the conception of heroes in literature. Gilgamesh is the eponymous hero of one of the world's oldest epics, a pedigree which makes him the literary “grandparent” of later heroes, ancient and modern. Stories about Gilgamesh have survived in numerous versions and languages, reflecting the popularity of his character in the Ancient Near East.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the powerful influence of *Gilgamesh* on later works of ancient literature. Directly and indirectly, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has influenced Western and Eastern thought and identity, from the Hebrew Bible, to Homer's *Odyssey*, to *The Tales of the Arabian Nights*. Gilgamesh is the world's first literary hero and the proto-hero for all heroes of the ancient world that follow.

Despite the widespread fame and influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the ancient world, Gilgamesh is a character largely unfamiliar among modern-day audiences. In comparison with Greek heroes such as Herakles and Perseus, Gilgamesh's fame has not endured in the cultural awareness of mainstream Western audiences. The slide into anonymity of Gilgamesh and his journeys is undoubtedly connected to the greater issue of the loss of Mesopotamian literary traditions, following the disappearance of the cuneiform writing system around the time of the first century CE.

The modern recovery of cuneiform literature and the popular knowledge of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are inextricably linked: in the story of the rediscovery of cuneiform literature, the influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* cannot be overstated. The central role of *Gilgamesh* in the nascence of the academic field of Assyriology has influenced the reception of the *Epic*, and shaped the development of the study of the Ancient Near East.

In the present day, Gilgamesh's story continues to find new audiences, perhaps largely due to the complexity of its hero. Gilgamesh's battle to accept his humanity (along with its limitations) gives his story a universal quality, yet in many ways, he is unlike other humans. Gilgamesh is described as two-thirds divine and one third man—with the human third sufficient to make him entirely mortal. Family is an important theme in the *Epic*: Gilgamesh's close relatives are deities and he has a special connection to the Mesopotamian solar deity, Shamash (Sumerian Utu). Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk and a hero among men, placing him in a position of exceptional religious and social significance.

The complicated nature of Gilgamesh's character makes him a rich and multi-faceted subject for study. He is frequently heedless, arrogant, and impulsive, and his characterisation couples heroic strength and virtue with human fallibility and frailty (Saporetti, 1979). His tyrannical behaviour at the beginning of the *Epic* results in his subjects petitioning the Mesopotamian deities to develop a plan to deal with his oppressive reign as king of Uruk. The consequences of Gilgamesh's reckless actions often hold terrible consequences, both for

himself and those around him. While the negative outcomes of the young king's actions are frequently foreseen by others, he ignores warnings and cautions, and continues to behave independently and follow his own (at times, questionable) judgement.

While Gilgamesh's royalty and quasi-divinity bring many benefits, such as heroic strength and high social status, they also carry serious obligations, both in terms of the religious and political spheres of life. Gilgamesh's many roles, as lover, hero, king, son, and champion, give his characterisation great depth and complexity.

A Mesopotamian hero

The geographical setting of the start of Gilgamesh's story is the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk (located in modern-day Iraq—see map on p. 4). His responsibilities to the city, and his ability to contribute to civilised endeavours, form an important aspect of his journey and its completion. Uruk is the first Mesopotamian urban centre, with urbanisation thought to have occurred there historically in the mid-fourth millennium BCE.

Gilgamesh's epic journey begins high upon Uruk's city walls, where the reader is introduced to a hero without parallel:

Surpassing all [other] kings, hero endowed with a superb
physique,
brave native of Uruk, butting wild bull!
Going at the fore he was the leader,
going also at the rear, the trust of his brothers! ...
Gilgameš so tall, perfect and terrible,
who opened passes in the mountains,
who dug wells on the hill-flanks,
and crossed the ocean, the wide sea, as far as the sunrise.

(*Epic of Gilgamesh*, SBV I: 29–32, 37–40. As noted here,
translations of the Akkadian language versions of the *Epic
of Gilgamesh* are taken from George, 2003)

Gilgamesh's story reflects universal themes, such as love and duty, yet at the same time, he is a manifestly Mesopotamian hero. Gilgamesh's adventures cause him to interact with important deities such as Ishtar and Enlil, and he inhabits the role of Mesopotamian kingship—with all its associated responsibilities and privileges. The relationship between Gilgamesh and ancient Mesopotamia is a reciprocal one, as Landsberger notes, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* holds a critical place in

Mesopotamian cultural identity (1960). For this reason, the study of *Gilgamesh* provides a useful entry point into the worlds of Mesopotamian religion, politics, culture, and literature.

A timely hero

The current period is a particularly significant one for studying the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The timing is especially opportune as the next few years will see the 150-year anniversary of the rediscovery of Gilgamesh. This milestone provides an occasion to reflect on the *Epic*'s reception, and the many advances that have occurred in the study of Gilgamesh, particularly in the last 50 years.

Even in the last few years, new pieces of the *Epic* have come to light, and the continuing study of cuneiform literature has broadened the modern understanding of the historical context surrounding *Gilgamesh*. The continuing work of recovering lost pieces of Mesopotamian cultural legacy through the study of cuneiform texts was recently the subject of international attention, with the deciphering of a previously unknown section of Gilgamesh.

In 2014, a new piece of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was published. Almost a year later, this accomplishment by Andrew George and Farouk Al-Rawi became world-wide news. The new fragment of the *Epic* gives greater detail to the journey of Gilgamesh and Enkidu through the Cedar Forest, and shed new light on the character of Humbaba, one of Gilgamesh's most significant adversaries.

Mesopotamian cultural heritage in danger

The ongoing threat to the historical and cultural legacy of the Ancient Near East, through modern day political upheaval, war, and acts of violence and vandalism makes the current moment critically important for enhancing the appreciation and the awareness of the necessity of conserving Mesopotamian cultural heritage. While past conflicts in the Middle East have also involved looting, vandalism, and the deplorable destruction of places, people and property, the global community has only recently begun to more broadly appreciate the tremendous cultural cost associated with armed conflict in the region. At the same time, many of those living under the continuing threat of destruction have taken extraordinary risks to preserve the legacy of the "cradle of civilisation." Increasing the modern understanding of cuneiform literature, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, has the benefit of creating greater awareness of the high value of Ancient Near Eastern

cultural capital, and the necessity of preserving Mesopotamia's legacy for future generations.

How to use this book

In my previous volume for the Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World Series, I noted that the effort to broaden the access to ancient Mesopotamian texts is not a novel endeavour. A recent tide of scholarly effort has surged in this direction, with significant results. Since the mid-1990s, the accessibility of translations and transliterations of Mesopotamian literature has improved, with the potential for the further expansion of interdisciplinary analyses in this area. Access to evidence has greatly benefited from the availability of online sources (some of which are regularly updated, where funding allows) containing text editions, English language translations, and some bibliography, notably the *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (CDLI), the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL), and the *Melammu Project*.

In this book, Sumerian text translations are sourced from the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL), an online project which began in 1997, and came to completion in 2006. Throughout this book, when using evidence from ETCSL, I provide the name of the text as it appears in the collection, along with catalogue numbers, so the reader may more easily locate the sources on the ETCSL website (listed in the Bibliography). The ETCSL project's creation of an accessible online repository of Sumerian literature stemmed from an appreciation of the genuine, growing interest in ancient literature from the public, and the potential for this audience to benefit from the opportunity to interact more directly with the literature of the world's earliest civilisations.

The use of translations from ETCSL allows for easy access to the transliterated texts as well as helpful bibliography on the quoted materials. However, conventions surrounding Sumerian translation and transliteration have continued to develop in the years since the ETCSL website was updated, and the reader should be aware of the dynamic state of the field. Many of the ETCSL translations were made in 2000 at the latest, meaning they are not well placed to reflect the changes in the field from the last 20 years (Attinger, 2009: 127–128).

This static quality to the ETCSL resource may be exemplified through the consideration of recent work by Westenholz and Zsolnay

(2016). In their article, “Categorizing Men and Masculinity in Sumer,” the (mis)use of the sign *lu2* in the ETCSL corpus is discussed. While ETCSL generally translates this sign as “man,” a convincing case is made by the authors for interpreting the sign as “person.” With awareness this limitation, ETCSL remains an important resource, and continues to fulfil its intended purpose of providing greater access to Sumerian literature to general audiences.

The Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is the primary focus here, and other Akkadian versions have been sourced from the definitive translation of Andrew George, which has been recognised as the scholarly standard since its publication in 2003. Translations of other Akkadian texts are noted throughout.

For clarity, I am generally using common English transliterations throughout the book (for example, “Gilgamesh” rather than “Gilgameš” or “Bilgameš”), although I retain the transliteration style of quoted translations. This means that in quotations of evidence, there will at times be spelling variances—a result of different scholarly styles of transliteration. A glossary may be consulted for frequently occurring characters and useful Sumerian and Akkadian terms.

In many ways, this is a watershed moment for the study of the Ancient Near East. Mesopotamia’s cultural heritage has been damaged by modern-day warfare and upheaval, yet conversely, literary evidence for ancient Mesopotamia is becoming more and more widely accessible to new audiences which continue to broaden and grow. The issues are related—as the area of study is threatened, and parts of its heritage are lost, there is a renewed commitment to exploring and preserving the rich cultural legacy of ancient Mesopotamia. Presenting the unique historical record of the ancient Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians to broader modern day audiences is an important part of conserving their cultural heritage for future generations.

Synopsis of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Standard Babylonian Version)

An awareness of the story of the long narrative poem of *Gilgamesh* is necessary to begin an exploration of the hero’s characterisation; Gilgamesh’s identity, and his developmental arc, are expressed in the poem through his actions and adventures, as well as through description and speech. To help orient the reader, a short synopsis of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is provided

here, and a list of the main characters may be found in the glossary.

Tablet I: a prologue introduces the eponymous hero of the *Epic*, he who “saw the Deep.” The prologue’s description of Gilgamesh recounts his achievements, and describes how he gained his exceptional wisdom. George has noted how this section combines two prologues, an older one and a newer one (2010: 7). Following the prologue(s), the narrative begins with a description of Gilgamesh performing as the tyrannical king of Uruk. His people complain to the deities, and a plan is formed to produce a rival for Gilgamesh, to keep him busy. Enkidu is created by the mother goddess, Aruru; he lives in the wilderness with wild animals.

A hunter encounters Enkidu in the wild, and reports his sighting to Gilgamesh in Uruk. Gilgamesh advises the hunter to take a woman into the wilderness to seduce Enkidu, and through this seduction, to alienate him from his animal herd. The hunter follows Gilgamesh’s instruction and takes Shamhat to a waterhole frequented by Enkidu. When Enkidu meets Shamhat, he is attracted to her and they spend six days and seven nights in sexual union. Afterwards, Enkidu can no longer keep up with his herd, and his animal companions become estranged from him. Shamhat describes to Enkidu the wonders of the city of Uruk and its king, Gilgamesh. Enkidu wishes to challenge Gilgamesh, and Shamhat warns him that Gilgamesh will be given dreams warning of Enkidu’s coming.

In the first of his dreams, Gilgamesh sees a meteor fall to earth. He tries with difficulty to pick it up, finally he embraces it like a wife and carries it back to his mother, Ninsun, who makes it his equal. In the second he sees an axe lying in the street, which again he picks up and carries home to his mother, where she makes it his equal. Ninsun interprets both of Gilgamesh’s dreams as foretelling the coming of Enkidu. Ninsun tells Gilgamesh that he will love his mighty companion like a wife, caressing and embracing him, and that Enkidu will save him.

Tablet II: Shamhat and Enkidu visit a group of shepherds, and Enkidu learns how to eat bread and drink beer, continuing his process of civilisation. He travels to Uruk, where he confronts Gilgamesh. The two heroes fight briefly, (possibly wrestle, see Azize, 2002), and then become friends.

Gilgamesh introduces Enkidu to Ninsun. This segment of the narrative is poorly preserved, but it seems Gilgamesh’s mother gives a speech ending with an acknowledgement of Enkidu’s unusual birth,

and his resulting lack of a family (George, 2003: 456).

Enkidu recounts his distress to Gilgamesh, although this section is also unclear. Perhaps in response, Gilgamesh suggests that he and Enkidu embark on a heroic adventure to the far away Cedar Forest. Enkidu responds by warning Gilgamesh of the danger posed by the forest guardian, Humbaba, and suggests that their journey will not be successful. Gilgamesh is not persuaded by Enkidu's concerns and he calls his friend a "weakling," who causes Gilgamesh's heart vexation through his "feeble talk." Gilgamesh then goes to the elders of Uruk, seeking their blessing. Enkidu warns the elders not to support Gilgamesh's plan, as it will lead to terrible danger. The elders repeat Enkidu's warnings about Humbaba, but Gilgamesh (seemingly) scoffs in response (George, 2003: 458).

Tablet III: this Tablet opens with Gilgamesh determined to visit the Forest of Cedars and to challenge Humbaba. A speech is given, advising Gilgamesh and suggesting that Enkidu lead the way on their difficult journey ahead. Enkidu is charged with Gilgamesh's protection by a spokesperson for the elders. Gilgamesh goes to visit his mother, Ninsun, and tells her of his plan.

Although Gilgamesh's dangerous idea brings sorrow to Ninsun, she immediately sets about performing numerous religious rituals, and petitions deities Shamash and Aya to protect her son. After seeking support from Shamash and Aya, Ninsun summons Enkidu to her presence. She gives a speech where she explains that she has decided to adopt him into her family, as her son. She then gives a blessing for the journey to the Cedar Forest for the two heroes.

Tablet IV: Gilgamesh and Enkidu have departed on their journey, and this tablet describes the pair making camp and sleeping. Gilgamesh has five terrifying dreams which he describes to Enkidu. Despite the foreboding imagery of the dreams, Enkidu assures Gilgamesh that they are auspicious.

Tablet V: in Tablet V, Gilgamesh and Enkidu finally arrive at the Cedar Forest. They fight with Humbaba and eventually subdue him, with the help of Shamash. Humbaba pleads for his life. Gilgamesh is inclined towards mercy, but Enkidu insists the forest guardian should be killed before Enlil, his protector, hears what has happened. Humbaba is killed, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu chop down the trees of the Cedar Forest. With the precious wood, Enkidu makes a giant door as a gift for the temple of Enlil at Nippur.

Tablet VI: back in Uruk, Gilgamesh is bathing and cleaning his weapons. Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of love, sees his beauty, and looks at him desirously. She proposes marriage. Gilgamesh, it seems, has heard of Ishtar, but he does not want to marry her. Gilgamesh assures Ishtar that he will not take her as a wife, due to her numerous bad qualities. In a long speech, he compares her to a drafty back door, a faulty battering ram, and a shoe which bites the feet of its owner. In response, Ishtar travels to the celestial realm of her father Anu, seeking the mighty Bull of Heaven. After some conflict with Anu, she brings the Bull to earth to attempt to destroy the legendary king.

The Bull's presence on earth carries destructive consequences, such as earthquakes and sink-holes. Gilgamesh, with the help of his companion Enkidu, uses his heroic strength to slay the giant creature, and offers its heart to Shamash. Ishtar and the women of Uruk mourn for the slain Bull, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu feast and celebrate.

Tablet VII: tablet VII begins with Enkidu telling Gilgamesh of a disturbing dream he has had. The great deities have held an assembly and decided that, due to the heroes' killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, they must be punished. Shamash, Anu, Ea and Enlil decide together that one of the pair must die, and it is further decided that Gilgamesh will survive, but not Enkidu.

Enkidu is greatly distressed and begins to lay curses upon many of the elements from the adventures of the earlier part of the narrative. He curses the door made of cedar, the hunter who found him in the wilderness, and his first lover, Shamhat. Enkidu is confronted by Shamash, who admonishes the hero for his poor treatment of Shamhat. He reminds Enkidu of the significance of his relationship with Gilgamesh, and in response, Enkidu lays blessings upon Shamhat. Enkidu then recounts to Gilgamesh a further dream, where he visits the Netherworld; he describes his journey to his friend. Enkidu presumably dies at the end of the tablet.

Tablet VIII: the death of Enkidu in the preceding Tablet leads Gilgamesh into a deep and prolonged period of mourning in Tablet VIII. Gilgamesh gives a long speech of lamentation, eulogising Enkidu and describing the various rites of mourning that are to be undertaken by the community of Uruk. The grief over Enkidu extends even to the animal world. The Tablet shows Gilgamesh commissioning a statue for Enkidu, making offerings to deities and sacrificing animals. The mourning for Enkidu extends over several days and involves numerous

rituals.

Tablet IX: Gilgamesh continues to mourn Enkidu in the beginning of Tablet VIII, but his own fear of death now becomes central to his efforts, and to the focus of the narrative. Gilgamesh goes on a quest to find the only human who has gained the secret to eternal life, Utanapishtim. To find him, Gilgamesh must travel along the path of the sun, underneath Mount Mashu. He meets the Scorpion People, guarding the tunnel to the path of the sun.

The Scorpion People recognise Gilgamesh's semi-divine nature, and grant him explicit permission to travel through Mount Mashu, a path never previously trod by a mortal. The Scorpion People warn Gilgamesh of the dangers of the path ahead, and then pronounce the gate of the mountain to be open. The journey through Mount Mashu takes a long time, and Gilgamesh eventually arrives in an unfamiliar land.

Tablet X: in the tavern by the edge of the ocean lives Siduri, goddess of wisdom. She speaks with Gilgamesh and advises him on the dangers of his journey, after he recounts his story of wandering and grief. Gilgamesh insists she tell him how to journey over the Waters of Death, to find Utanapishtim. He meets the ferryman, Ur-Shanabi, after destroying the Stone Ones. Gilgamesh again tells his story, and Ur-Shanabi agrees to help him cross the dangerous waters. First, Gilgamesh must cut down and strip timbers. After the perilous journey, Gilgamesh meets Utanapishtim at last. For a third time, he recounts the story of his loss and grief.

Tablet XI: in the penultimate tablet, Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the Flood, and of how he received his immortality in a unique set of circumstances from the gods. The circumstances cannot be repeated, and so Gilgamesh's quest for immortality must fail.

Utanapishtim and his wife suggest Gilgamesh hunt down the herb of immortality, which will restore him to youth. Gilgamesh does as suggested, but then loses the plant to a passing snake before he can try it. The hero cries, and then returns home. The tablet ends with Gilgamesh describing the strong walls of Uruk to Ur-Shanabi.

Tablet XII: this tablet is different in form and structure to the rest of the *Epic*, and can be considered a “noticeable appendage” (Sasson, 1972: 267) to the rest of the narrative. It contains a translation of part of the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, a composition which will be considered in greater detail in [Chapter 6](#).

The story involves Gilgamesh and Enkidu learning about the Netherworld. At the start of the story (which seems to begin about half-way through the narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*), Gilgamesh loses a stick and ball down a hole to the Netherworld. Enkidu volunteers to retrieve the items, and Gilgamesh warns his friend of how to conduct himself in the Netherworld, so that he may safely return. Enkidu does not heed this advice, and gets stuck.

Gilgamesh seeks help from several deities, before being helped by Ea, who instructs Shamash to bring Enkidu back. Gilgamesh asks Enkidu about the Netherworld, and is given a somewhat gloomy account of it by Enkidu. The tablet ends with Gilgamesh establishing funerary rites for his parents.

The evidence for Gilgamesh

The most well-known source for Gilgamesh in the modern day is the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, recounted over 12 tablets, is the version that is most often the basis of scholarly analyses of Gilgamesh and his story. Despite the prominence of this version of the *Epic*, sources for Gilgamesh are varied and involve numerous poems, artistic and iconographic sources, narratives, and ancient languages.

The earliest known literature involving the character of Gilgamesh comes in the form of five Sumerian poems dating to the Old Babylonian period, although it is thought both the oral and written traditions of Gilgamesh originated at an even earlier stage in history. These Sumerian poems form a kind of cycle, containing some of the same events and characters as the later Akkadian versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, along with unique elements. In terms of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself, there are multiple versions of the hero's adventures including translations in Hittite and Hurrian. Gilgamesh and Enkidu appear in Mesopotamian material culture, and the hero receives prayers in royal praise poetry and hymns. Gilgamesh was venerated as a deity of the underworld, and his name is used in exorcism rituals.

Gilgamesh presents a distinct challenge in terms of evidence. While there is a great deal of ancient evidence relating to the hero, and this evidence shows great diversity, the main literary sources are extremely fragmented and the evidence is difficult to contextualise. Even the most well-known edition of Gilgamesh's narrative, the

Standard Babylonian Version, has reached its present form in translation through careful reconstruction by scholars working with numerous broken and damaged tablets.



Figure 0.2 Cuneiform tablet. Walters Art Museum. Number 48.1462 ca. 1840–ca. 1730 bce Business letter on clay tablet. Acquired by Henry Walters, 1913 © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

Many readers will be aware that the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is commonly related in 12 tablets, with each tablet working as a kind of “chapter” of the epic overall. In cuneiform, there is no extant version of Standard Babylonian Version that holds all 12 tablets in an unbroken and complete form. Indeed, Andrew George’s definitive two-volume translation and commentary, *The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*, from 2003 was compiled with reference

to over a hundred identified fragments (George, 2003: 380). The term “tablet” is used to describe the sections or divisions of the *Gilgamesh* story, whereas a “fragment” of the text is an object bearing an individual museum number or other inventory mark, and may be very small (George, 2003: 380–381). The incomplete and damaged nature of the evidence means that while suggestions can be made to fill the gaps in our understanding, even the best scholarly contributions are often based on a particular interpretation of the evidence at hand.

In this book, the image of Gilgamesh gathered from a range of ancient sources is considered, with an emphasis on the literary evidence from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the Standard Babylonian Version. This emphasis follows the modern-day tradition of utilising the Standard Babylonian Version as the primary source for scholarly works.

Gilgamesh in material culture

In literary sources for Gilgamesh, the hero’s killing of the Forest Guardian Humbaba (Sumerian Huwawa), and his slaying of the Bull of Heaven feature prominently. These two events also feature in the depiction of Gilgamesh and his story in Mesopotamian art, from the time of the early second millennium (George, 2003: 100). The presence of scenes from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in material culture is a topic of debate, with images often interpreted in different ways (Amiet, 1960).

As Lambert has stated, the study of the content of Mesopotamian art is severely hampered by a lack of captions, or other identifying signs, with some of the most frequently attested artistic motifs proving unidentifiable from texts (1997: 50). Most artistic depictions relevant to the *Gilgamesh* narrative appear on miniature artefacts, such as seals, with no written legends relating to the content of the imagery (Ornan, 2010: 231), a problem considered characteristic of Mesopotamian art. Despite these difficulties, scholarly attempts to identify artistic representations of Gilgamesh have been part of the field since the days of George Smith, the scholar credited with the *Epic*’s rediscovery in 1872 (Lambert, 1997: 51).

Bull-wrestling motifs and images depicting the slaying of Humbaba had a wide and enduring presence in Mesopotamian material culture, suggesting a broad circulation of the hero and his story beyond the royal court and scribal schools of ancient Mesopotamia (George, 2003: 100). The artistic representation of a hero fighting a bull is often identified as Gilgamesh, although it is thought that this scene

antedates the time of Gilgamesh (Bienkowski and Millard, 2000: 128–129), and the bearded figure wrestling animals in Mesopotamian art is more commonly associated with a “*lahmu*” (a servant of the deity Enki) (Azize, 2002).

There is general agreement that an image of two men attacking a kneeling man depicts the murder of Humbaba by Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Green, 1997: 137). Cylinder seal iconography showing the battle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and their two “arch-opponents” are found from the Old Babylonian period, and continue as a thematic presence into late Assyrian glyptic in “almost canonised format” (Ataç, 2010: 134). Iconographic depictions of the Bull of Heaven fighting Gilgamesh in the service of Ishtar have been viewed as illustrating the theme of the human-animal struggle in the epic literature (Offner, 1960). The wrinkled, grinning face of Humbaba is found in material culture from very early periods, and is thought to have had an apotropaic function.

Similarly, Gilgamesh’s well-known animal adversaries, the lions which later contribute to his sartorial image, are commonly seen in Mesopotamian art and iconography, and also thought to allow “good things” to enter a space, but protect against evil (Watanabe, 2015: 221). Images of bulls serve a similar function. When Gilgamesh’s adversaries appear in the absence of the hero it is difficult to know how much (if any) of their representation might reference the myths around Uruk’s legendary king, but it is interesting to note the interconnection between visual and literary representations of power involving the characters from the *Epic*.

This connection may be further seen in artistic and literary representations of the Scorpion People from Tablet IX of the *Epic* (considered further in [Chapter 3](#)). Noegel notes the placement of *lamassu*, and other mythological creatures, as guardians of thresholds, as their liminality meant they could cross the border between humanity and the divine (Noegel, 2007b: 16–17). Ornan observes that the depictions of a non-realistic confrontation with a beast or a fantastic animal provides support for the view of the human-like characters in the image holding divine qualities (2005: 104–105). It would seem, then, that Gilgamesh’s choice of opponent, and his overcoming of these opponents, emphasises his own liminality, as he attempts to reach beyond the human condition.

Myths and legends involving Gilgamesh come from Mesopotamia and are written in the cuneiform script, considered to be the world's oldest form of writing (although there is some competition from Egyptian sources). It is difficult to overstate the importance of the cuneiform system of writing on shaping world culture; for almost two thousand years, cuneiform was the primary language of communication throughout the Ancient Near East, extending to parts of the Mediterranean. Despite its dominance in antiquity, the usage of cuneiform ceased entirely between the first and third centuries CE. The disappearance of cuneiform accompanied, and likely facilitated, the loss of the awareness of Mesopotamian cultural traditions in the ancient and modern worlds.

Cuneiform is composed of wedge-shaped characters and was written on clay tablets—the name “cuneiform” comes from Latin, meaning “wedge-shaped.” The developments in writing, the wheel, agriculture, and astronomy in this region have earned it the epithet “the cradle of civilisation.” In the words of the famous Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer: “history begins at Sumer.” The earliest (readable) cuneiform writings are in Sumerian, long believed a linguistic orphan with no relation to any known language (Cunningham, 2013: 118; Leith, 2005: 3375). By the middle of the third millennium, the Sumerian language was beginning to be eclipsed by Akkadian, a Semitic language which is an early cognate of Hebrew.

The literary texts that form the basis for this analysis comprise a small percentage of surviving cuneiform texts, with most extant written works reflecting administrative and business purposes in composition. While the Akkadian and Sumerian texts used in this study both utilise the cuneiform script, they are linguistically distinct and probably chronologically also, as Sumerian seems to have been disappearing, as a spoken language, as Akkadian was becoming more common.

While Sumerian is linguistically isolated, Akkadian is related to other Semitic languages. The two main dialects of Akkadian were Assyrian (from northern Mesopotamia) and Babylonian (from Southern Mesopotamia), but literary texts were written in an artificial literary dialect, which differs from everyday texts such as letters, and spoken dialects. This means there is virtually no possibility of dating Akkadian literature on linguistic grounds. Modern knowledge of Sumerian is insufficient for certain dating on the basis of language used, and most Sumerian literature that has survived to the present day is in the form of copies from the Old Babylonian period. Further,

while Akkadian and Sumerian were separate languages, they exerted influence on one another. Sumerian influences are present in the style, content, format and vocabulary of Akkadian literature, and Sumerian literature composed after the end of the third millennium BCE was likely written by authors from an Akkadian-speaking background (see Foster, 2013).

Unlike other ancient writing media, such as the papyri or leather scrolls crucial to the analysis of the Classical world, cuneiform tablets survive in great abundance. While the evidence is often fragmented and incomplete, the physical materials recording cuneiform literature have survived through virtue of being almost indestructible (Vogelzang and Vanstiphout, 1992: 1). Hundreds of thousands of clay tablets containing cuneiform writing have been recovered from ruined Mesopotamian cities, and together with archaeological discoveries, have provided the main sources of evidence on the Mesopotamian culture.

Genre and Mesopotamian epic

Gilgamesh is the best-known example of “epic literature” that has reached modern audiences from ancient Mesopotamia. The variety of evidence relating to the figure of Gilgamesh, and the multiple versions of the epic, point towards similarly wide fame in the antiquity. As the focus here is primarily on the literary Gilgamesh, and the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is important to first consider the question of what is “epic literature” in ancient Mesopotamia?

The modern genre of “epic” received its name from the ancient Greek word “*epos*” meaning “word,” which by extension could signify “a story told in words” (King, 2009a: 3). In Classical times, the precise description of what kinds of literary works could fit the name “epic” eluded consensus, but one definition provided by Aristotle suggests that an epic should involve a long and focused story, involving a variety of events as seen in tragedy, expressed in complex language and with the poet in the background (King, 2009a: 4).

Although generally subsumed into the broad genre of “epic” in the present day, Mesopotamian epic literature is in many ways unlike Classical epic literature. The problematic nature of ascribing the term “epic” to compositions from ancient Mesopotamian has been lucidly explored by Michalowski, who notes the “multiple alterity” of

Sumerian poetry, and the poems' reimagining to fit a reinvented heroic past (2010: 21).

Mesopotamian epics are not written in verse, as Classical epics may be, and while Classical writers may have debated the qualities of an "epic," the definition of the genre appears not to have been a pressing concern for ancient Mesopotamians. Sasson notes in a chapter contrasting Near Eastern epic traditions that the composers of Mesopotamian literature undoubtedly had the ability and opportunity to create a theoretical language to assist in the discussion of literature, and to form labels to discriminate among compositions, "yet the mystery is that they hardly bothered" (2005: 219). In terms of length, style, and content, the literature that might be described as "epic" displays such strong heterogeneity that it is plausible to raise the question of whether it may be overly anachronistic to attempt to define a sense of a Mesopotamian "genre" in modern scholarship.

Literary compositions do show evidence of descriptive markers and categorisation. In a chapter exploring Near Eastern literary genres, Holm observed that the native titles, colophons, and headers are helpful to an extent, but are not generally conclusive in terms of assessing whether individual texts should be considered as part of a broader set or style (2007: 270). For example, there are numerous Sumerian compositions noted as "*balbales*" in a colophon. While *balbale* poetry is especially "difficult to define" (Rubio, 2009: 64), it can involve dialogues and often employs the literary technique of parallelism, and commonly features repetition. Yet, even with these defining features, the purpose and conventions of *balbale* remain somewhat nebulous, a quality shared with many other cuneiform literary styles.

The problem is not confined to the distant world of antiquity. In his monograph on fictional Akkadian autobiographies, Longman noted that Assyriologists have been uncritical and unsystematic in their analysis of cuneiform texts, and have shown an overreliance on dated approaches from the field of biblical studies, without reference to contemporary developments in the related fields of comparative literature and literary theory (Longman, 1991: 4). Despite the difficulties, however, recent scholarly developments continue to show promise for interpreting literary works in terms of genre, mode, and style (these labels are well defined in Longman, 1991: 9–13), and it is no longer considered anachronistic to consider Mesopotamian literature from this perspective.

It has been observed that certain types of cuneiform literature

exhibited a “kinship” which supports their collective treatment (George, 2007). Recent scholarship on the issue has demonstrated that it is plausible to consider how styles of Mesopotamian literature may have fitted into categories analogous to “genres” (see especially Vanstiphout, 1999a and 1999b). While it has long been recognised that different types of literature were written in different styles, and likely used at different occasions for varied purposes, the consideration of “genre” in Mesopotamian literature was greatly enhanced by a “trail-blazing” (Cooper, 2006a: 39) article by Vanstiphout in 1986. Vanstiphout’s greatly influential work on generic analyses has built a strong case for the usefulness of genre in the study of Mesopotamian literary works (see Vanstiphout, 1986, 1999a, and 1999b).

The consideration of Mesopotamian literary “genres” remains an area where a great deal is yet to be understood. There is little consensus on the identifying features which might allow a work to fit into a set literary category, and the boundaries and possible conventions of different genres require further analysis. It is also unclear, despite some useful scholarly investigations, how these “genres” may show distinctiveness in different historical periods and locations.

The developing awareness that the composers of Mesopotamian literature had a sense of “genre” allows for the future possibility of a clearer understanding of ancient Mesopotamian texts. As noted by Longman, establishing a sense of “genre” is an important element in appreciating the meaning and purpose of literary works (1991). Once the shape of a “genre” has been established, it becomes possible to explore how the conventions of a particular literary style are being used or contravened, and even potentially how they may have changed over time, all points which are useful in establishing meaning in the text.

Issues surrounding the identification of an “epic genre” are more complex. “Ancient epic” is a much-debated term, particularly due to the great variety between the literature of ancient cultures across different historical and geographical settings. Considering possible distinctions between “myth” and “epic” is a challenging exercise in a wide range of Akkadian literature (von Hecker, 1974).

Even once the field is narrowed to specifically consider Mesopotamian “epic,” the situation remains abstruse. The debate over the definition of “Mesopotamian epic” has been well encapsulated by Noegel, in his chapter on the subject from 2005. Noegel offers a

content-based definition of Mesopotamian epic, stating that he will regard as “epic” “all poetic narratives that praise the accomplishments of a heroic figure of history or tradition” (2005: 233). This definition is useful for differentiating between divine myths and epics, and between “epics” and “pseudo-autobiographical” texts. This useful quality is the basis for its application here. However, it is worth restating that the term “epic” in relation to *Gilgamesh* remains a “coinage of convenience” (George, 2003: 3).

To borrow a term from the legendary biblicist Robert Alter, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* can be considered to display an “extreme heterogeneity” in terms of “genre” (1992: 45). Alter is well known for his immensely influential work applying literary theory to the Hebrew Bible. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains many different literary “forms,” and a wide variety or “anthology” of genre (George, 2007: 51–53). In a chapter exploring form and meaning in *Gilgamesh*, George noted that various passages of the *Epic* reflect different literary “forms,” including elegies, prayers, curses and blessings, invectives, hymnic praise poetry, folktales, laments and proverbs (2007: 52).

Many passages in narratives involving Gilgamesh can be viewed as aetiologies, such as the story of the snake eating the herb of immortality, the death of the Bull of Heaven, and the destruction of the Cedar Forest and the surrounding mountain ranges (aetiologies in *Gilgamesh* are discussed in [Chapter 5](#)). The prominence of aetiologies in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is likely to be related to the narrative focus on the theme of wisdom in the *Epic*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* holds a great deal in common with wisdom texts (George, 2003: 33). Indeed, George has observed the *Epic of Gilgamesh* shows a “wisdom mode” from the time of the Old Babylonian Version (2007: 53–54).

With awareness of the difficulties of classification from both the ancient and modern perspective, Van der Toorn argues persuasively that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* can be considered as “wisdom literature.” In a 2007 chapter exploring the literary genre of wisdom, Van der Toorn explains:

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a piece of cuneiform literature that we do not immediately associate with wisdom. An epic is an epic, not wisdom. Yet the Epic of Gilgamesh is truly wisdom literature, not only by modern standards, but also from the perspective of the Neo-Assyrian scribes and scholars.

(2007: 21)

Van der Toorn's observation of the combination of wisdom and epic literary elements in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* supports the view of the heterogeneous nature of the composition. The emphasis on wisdom is prominent in the content of the text, but the "genre" of wisdom does not entirely define the generic variety shown in *Gilgamesh*. In noting this, however, it is important to keep in mind the imprecise qualities of "wisdom texts" (further explored in [Chapter 5](#)) and "genre," and the awareness that what modern scholars might view as generic hybridity may have perceived as conventional to the ancient composers of *Gilgamesh*.

While the scholarly understanding of Mesopotamian literary style is still unfolding, the ability to use the "short-hand" of genres is helpful for providing greater clarity in discussing this ancient literature. In addition, by ruminating over possible definitions of genre, even in the awareness of the necessarily anachronistic nature of these labels, the complexity, sophistication, and variety of the literature can be explored.

Notes on Mesopotamian literature

As is hopefully clear from the above discussion, the ancient Mesopotamians did not have a term synonymous with the modern term of "epic." The ancient Mesopotamians did provide classifications for their literary compositions, but this ancient assignment of labels to literary compositions now considered to be mythical or epic in nature seems amorphous and vague from a modern perspective. In this, and other ways, Mesopotamian literature shows its distinction from the mores of modern Western literary traditions. A more text-faithful approach, following the Mesopotamian style of classification, would most likely hold many benefits, but is avoided here due to the convenience of using modern terms as a "short-hand" for comparisons.

Mesopotamian literature was generally anonymously written and untitled. Works were identified by their opening lines. Exceptions to this broad trend are rare, and often (or in Charpin's view, always) a literary device (2010: 179–181). Some literary works are attributed to deities or sages, and some to legendary figures. Other compositions are accredited to the efforts of "historical figures." The work may also be designated to be of a somewhat "mixed" authorship. The *Erra Epic* (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) is attributed to the scribe Kabti-ilani-Marduk, who further credits divine inspiration in the narrative's creation.

The importance and complexity of literary traditions surrounding the Mesopotamian hero necessitates an overview here of the development of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as it is currently understood. The purpose of this overview is not to provide a complete analysis of the multiple versions and development of the Gilgamesh narrative as this extremely complex task has been well addressed elsewhere—the scholarly standard on this topic is Tigay’s *The Evolution of the Epic of Gilgamesh* (1982), and a recent chapter by Milstein has revisited the issues surrounding the composition with great clarity (2016). Instead, a short outline of recent research into the *Epic*’s background is given to provide a sense of context for the reader, along with transparency around issues of the selection of texts in this book, choice of translation, and the limits and subjectivity of any one approach to what could, in modern terms, be deemed the Gilgamesh “multiverse.”

The authorship and composition of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an extremely dense topic. Although the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic* is the most commonly known version of *Gilgamesh* in the modern day, this version is not the earliest among the various traditions surrounding *Gilgamesh*. The earliest extant literary works involving Gilgamesh are five Sumerian poems: *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*, *Gilgamesh and Agga*, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* and *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*. The surviving copies of these texts date to the 18th century BCE (in the Old Babylonian period), but it is generally thought that they originate from the Ur III period (George, 2010: 3).

While some of these myths overlap with familiar aspects of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (most notably Tablet XII and the Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*), others are connected through the appearance of shared characters such as Inanna (Semitic Ishtar), Anu (a primary Mesopotamian deity associated with heaven) and Enkidu (the connection between the Sumerian cycle of Gilgamesh myths and the Old Babylonian material has been usefully explored by Michalowski, 2010, and Fleming and Milstein, 2010). Although the characters in the myths and the later versions are frequently the same, Gilgamesh’s personal interactions with others show some variety—with the most striking example of this his often-antagonistic but occasionally supportive relationship with the goddess of love, Ishtar.

The connection between the Sumerian poetic compositions involving Gilgamesh and the later epics is complex, an issue well

expressed by Michalowski in his chapter exploring the origins of Sumerian heroic poetry:

The Gilgamesh material is not homogeneous, neither in its history, in its distribution, nor in its content and style. Decontextualized and set out sequentially on consecutive pages in a modern book they appear as a synchronic cycle, but the evidence from antiquity undermines this picture.

(Michalowski, 2010: 17)

The connection between the Sumerian myths and the Akkadian versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been considered sufficiently tenuous for Volk to raise the question of how much awareness the Akkadian composers may have had of these compositions (while noting the special case of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*) (1995: 63). Volk further notes the difficulties presented by the substantial variances in the numerous versions, in terms of understanding potential nuances and intentional references made by the editors of the *Epic* (Volk, 1995: 63–64).

Although still an area of debate, it seems probable that oral traditions relating Gilgamesh's adventures predated the extant literary versions. The complexity of the extant versions suggests the story of Gilgamesh was, by the time of their writing, already one of some antiquity, and coupled with a lack of earlier written sources an oral prehistory of "some generations" may be posited (George, 2010: 4). Pictorial renderings of the killing of the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba from early periods support the likely existence of well-known oral traditions about the hero that were transmitted firstly into images, and then later into writing (Ornan, 2010). The oral tradition of Gilgamesh's story likely continued alongside the written versions for the period over two millennia in which people were committing versions of the narrative to writing.

Sinleqiunnini and the Standard Babylonian Version

In this book, emphasis is given to the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a revised version of the Gilgamesh narrative, current in the first millennium BCE. This version is known as "*sha naqba imuru*," meaning "He who saw the Deep." This title comes from the opening lines of the composition, a method of naming commonly used by scribes to identify Mesopotamian literary works (Rubio,

2009).

The Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* was adopted as an authoritative version of the narrative in ancient times; no copies of variant versions survive after the seventh century BCE. While the text of the Standard Babylonian Version was not completely fixed, it was, “remarkably stable” (George, 2010: 6).

The Standard Version is associated with the “historical” priest and scribe, Sinleqiunnini, and survives in the fragmented form of a number of collections of tablets. The earliest extant versions of the SBV are thought to date around the time of the ninth or eighth centuries BCE, and the last dated manuscript is chronologically placed to around 130 BCE (see George, 1999b, for a clear summary). Although by the first millennium the reproduction of *Gilgamesh* was increasingly standardised, with more fixed wording than earlier versions, “considerable variation” still exists between different texts, and our knowledge of the Standard Babylonian Version remains incomplete (Fleming and Milstein, 2010: 1).

In contrast with earlier versions, the Standard Babylonian Version is associated with an “historical” author. The historicity of this author, Sinleqiunnini, is unclear, yet it seems certain the *Epic*’s more contemporaneous audience considered him to be its composer. The evidence for this view comes from a Neo-Assyrian literary catalogue, where *Gilgamesh* is said to have come from the authorship of Sinleqiunnini:

The Series of Gilgameš; by Sin-liqi-unninni, the [magician].

(K.9717 + 10, Lambert, 1962: 67)

The translation of the text from the fragment of tablet K.9717 by Lambert has several notable features: the *Epic* is known in literary “catalogues” as the *Series of Gilgamesh*, written by (literally “from the mouth of”) Sinleqiunnini, who is described as a “magician.” The name Sinleqiunnini means “Sin is one who accepts a prayer” (George, 2003: 27), with the name “Sin” referring to the Mesopotamian lunar deity (Sumerian Nanna). The word signifying his profession, *mashmashshu*, translated as “magician,” is based on a reconstruction of the text, but is commonly interpreted as “exorcist.”

Very little is known about Sinleqiunnini and his connection to the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. George sets out the problem clearly when he notes that either Sinleqiunnini was a

legendary poet credited with creating the earliest Babylonian version of the poem that later came to be known as the *Series of Gilgamesh*, or he was a later scholar who established the “final form” of the *Series of Gilgamesh*. Charpin presents this later role as more of an “editor” than an “author” in our terminology (2010: 180). The current tendency is to view Sinleqiunnini as a scholar from the second half of the second millennium who lived in Uruk and had a significant contribution to shaping the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* is a sophisticated and intricate work, written with what Oppenheim called a “fluid ease” that is integrated with “those incidents that Mesopotamian poets like to present in a minimum of words” (1977: 262–263). Despite its fragmented form, the Standard Babylonian Version shows remarkable coherency, and its reworking by Sinleqiunninni is considered a “modernisation” which reflects a more introspective mood than the Old Babylonian Version (George, 2003: 33). Vanstiphout considered the thematic aspects of the text, and used the shape of the poem to consider possible intentions of the ancient composer (1990). Vanstiphout concluded that the “most important and also most incisive intention or message of the poem thus seems to be the work itself as a great work of art” (1990: 67). This observation colours the modern reception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* with the awareness that it is “first and foremost (and maybe even in the last analysis) ...a literary artefact” (Vanstiphout, 1990: 68).

Gilgamesh: historic king or legend?

Gilgamesh in this volume is considered as a literary character, but the question of his possible historical origins remains relevant. The historicity of the figure of Gilgamesh is a complicated topic, due in part to the scarcity of evidence for an historical Gilgamesh, but also due to the inclination towards mixing “historical” and “mythical” elements in Mesopotamian literature. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* combines historical settings and cultural institutions with supernatural characters and fantastical settings, although it is worth noting Van de Mieroop’s recent observation of the dearth of “historical” characters in the *Gilgamesh* narrative (2012: 47). A useful survey of scholarship on the question of Gilgamesh’s historicity has been provided by Marchesi (2004, Appendix V).

The historical basis for the literary hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

once had general and often unquestioning acceptance in the academic community (Alster, 1974: 49). The historicity of other Mesopotamian heroes, such as Lugalbanda and Enmerkar, was also “tacitly taken for granted” until relatively recently (Alster, 1974: 49). It is frequently noted that Gilgamesh appears on the *Sumerian King List* as the fifth ruler of Uruk, reigning around 2700 BCE (Tigay, 1982: 13–16).

Wilcke has noted the capacity for King Lists to inform upon—and further complicate—Gilgamesh’s genealogy (1989: 561–563). The *Sumerian King List* is a composition which gives the names and some biographical details for many historical and legendary kings. The *List* counts the regnal years of kings, and follows the transfer of rulership from one ancient city to the next—a geographical focus which has been contrasted against the genealogical order of Akkadian king lists (Hallo, 1983).

The extremely long lifespans ascribed to some rulers of the *King List*, particularly antediluvian kings, would suggest the material does not present a purely historical account of dynastic progression in Mesopotamia. George considers the “preposterously long” durations of reign attributed to early rulers in the *King List* to be an example of the widespread myth that early men lived to fantastic ages (2003: 102), a trope with which readers of the Book of Genesis or Hesiod might feel familiar. Inscriptional evidence has been used to support the view that at least some of the kings of Uruk from the Early Dynastic period, listed among the catalogue of rulers, were historical figures, but this evidence is contested, and its ability to provide support for an historical king Gilgamesh is also a matter of debate (Van de Mieroop, 2012).

The potential divide between historical and legendary kings is frequently indistinct in written and material evidence: imagery from epic literature underlies the historical ideology of early Mesopotamian kings, and royal iconography blends the image of the historical king with his legendary predecessors (Ornan, 2014). Royal epics contain motifs very close to those that appear in the epics of legendary heroes and in Sumerian king lists; rulers who feature as the heroic subjects of epic are listed along with later historical kings.

The blending of historical and natural elements with legendary and supernatural ones in literature further blurs the already indistinct line between Mesopotamian literary styles. In Mesopotamia, the role of king connected the human and divine spheres; royal biographies of historical kings included mythical elements, and the stories of legendary heroes may have developed from famous historical figures.

Although the debate over Gilgamesh's historical background continues, it is worth noting that his appearance in a variety of texts, and his identification as a deity and judge of the underworld, mean that it is likely his persona had a long reach beyond the clay surface of the written tablet in ancient Mesopotamia. Although in this book we consider Gilgamesh as a heroic figure from early epic, in the ancient world his literary manifestation was not the full measure of his identity.

Gilgamesh: a Mesopotamian hero

For many audiences in the present day, Gilgamesh is not only a Mesopotamian hero—he is *the* Mesopotamian hero. This feature of the *Epic's* reception, also noted by Alster (1990), reflects the primacy of *Gilgamesh* in the modern awareness of ancient Mesopotamian culture. While describing the extant collection of Mesopotamian literary works as “an embarrassment of riches,” Ackermann suggests that the epic poem of *Gilgamesh* is as notable as all the rest of Akkadian literature combined (a position considered “rather rash” by Foster, 2005b: 540) (2005: 33). The uniqueness of Gilgamesh's heroic stature was observed by Kramer, who noted that in addition to being the best known of Sumerian heroes, Gilgamesh is “the hero without peer of the entire ancient Near East” (1963: 185).

Yet, as noted earlier, Gilgamesh is not the sole inhabitant in the hall of great Mesopotamian heroes. Legendary figures from Sumerian and Akkadian literature, such as Lugalbanda, Enmerkar, Ninurta, and Adapa, all feature in heroic narratives from Mesopotamia. Like Gilgamesh, these narratives involve rich characters and exciting plotlines, interactions with the natural and divine worlds, fierce battles, and magic. Like Gilgamesh, too, these heroes held wide fame and significance in ancient Mesopotamia. Lugalbanda appears on the *Sumerian King List*, and was worshipped as a deity in the Ur III period. Sumerian heroes and epics seem to hold different qualities and traditions than Akkadian ones, and Gilgamesh's appearance in Sumerian and Akkadian sources is a complicating issue. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to compare recognition and renown among Mesopotamian heroes in the ancient world (although an intriguing project), it seems clear that the relative modern obscurity of most Mesopotamian heroes, in contrast with Gilgamesh, did not have its genesis in ancient times.

The dominance of the character of Gilgamesh in the modern-day conception of cuneiform literary traditions, to the near exclusion of his fellow heroes, is a significant feature of the reception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. To what then might we owe this phenomenon? It has often been noted that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* holds a distinctive role in the foundation of the academic discipline of Assyriology. The modern rediscovery of the *Epic* was a watershed moment in the understanding of the cultural legacy of the Ancient Near East, yet the connection does not fully account for *Gilgamesh's* popularity.

Recovering Mesopotamian literature

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was first translated by self-taught cuneiform scholar George Smith of the British Museum. In 1872, Smith discovered the presence of an ancient Babylonian Flood narrative in the text with striking parallels to the biblical Flood story of the Book of Genesis. From this event, and other developments in the mid-19th century CE, the process of recovering the cuneiform literary catalogue has continued to the present day. *Gilgamesh's* impact in linking cuneiform narratives with biblical texts was sustained through the development of close ties between the nascent field of Assyriology, and the established tradition of Biblical Studies.

Further pieces of the *Gilgamesh* narrative were found and published relatively quickly (see, for example, the publication by Smith of 1873. For the process of the recovery of *Epic*, see Damrosch, 2008). The recovery and dispersion of other Mesopotamian heroic narratives was something of an uneven process, with some texts becoming available swiftly, and others more slowly. For the point of comparison, we may consider the example of the Sumerian hero, Enmerkar.

A legendary king and builder, Enmerkar is the hero of a number of epic narratives. Perhaps the most well-known of these, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, was first published by Samuel Noah Kramer in 1952. Conversely, the birth narrative of Sargon of Akkad, containing heroic elements, was published by George Smith in 1872—the same year that he translated the first part of *Gilgamesh* (for issues around the historicity of this narrative, see Van de Mieroop, 1999). Like *Gilgamesh*, the Sargon narrative has been noted for its biblical parallel, particularly to the birth story of Moses in Exodus 1:22–2:10 (Wright, 2009: 343).

Many masterful works of Mesopotamian literature have only

recently become accessible in satisfactory translations. The weight of modern scholarly analyses has rested on a handful of compositions, such as *Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian Creation myth of *Enuma Elish* and the Babylonian Flood narrative, *Atrahasis*. With *Atrahasis* becoming available through publication for the first time just over 50 years ago (Lambert and Millard, 1969), it would seem that the speed of recovery of ancient literature provides no easy correlation with academic interest. It cannot be suggested, then, that the early recovery and publication of *Gilgamesh* can account for the relative fame of the *Epic* compared to other works of cuneiform literature.

Gilgamesh is without doubt a literary masterpiece, showing complex use of language, colourful imagery, and employing deep and intricate themes. *Gilgamesh*'s dominance cannot easily be attributed to the superior value of his story, however, with other Mesopotamian heroes featuring in epics noted for their beauty and structural sophistication. *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* is considered as "probably the finest piece of poetic storytelling ever produced by the Old Babylonian authors" (Vanstiphout, 2003: 49). The narratives of the legendary figure Lugalbanda are exceptionally rich in imagery, as demonstrated by the statistical analysis of Black (1998). Despite the high quality and increasing accessibility of literary materials relating to other Mesopotamian heroes, the scales remain tipped in favour of *Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh's modern dominance may be more than a product of the *Epic*'s reception. It has been noted that the greater length of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in comparison to other Mesopotamian epics, makes it a better fit for a modern conception of "epic literature" informed by Classical traditions.

It is the power of the narrative of *Gilgamesh*, and its universal relevance, that give the hero and his story a timeless appeal and continued popularity. This idea is well elucidated by Bottéro, who argues that the extraordinary diffusion of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* stems from the universality of its themes (1992: 49). Bottéro defines the *Epic*'s "universal" appeal as its capacity to touch upon those elements that are common to all people, and engage whole-heartedly with the fundamental esoteric concerns of the human condition (1992: 40).

Approaches to *Gilgamesh*: an epic character

The topic of *Gilgamesh* is sufficiently vast to require a focused

approach to its exploration. Gilgamesh is considered here primarily as a literary character from ancient Mesopotamia. This methodological choice means emphasising written traditions, and privileging literary characters over historical ones.

Although the primary source for the hero in this book is the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there are many narrative incarnations which also contribute to the hero's literary characterisation. The material evidence for Gilgamesh also plays an indispensable role in forming his ancient characterisation, and he is further known as a judge of the underworld. It is the hero of the *Epic*, rather than the *Epic* itself, which is at the heart of the analysis here. Yet, despite these attempts at methodologically circumscribing the subject of this book, the topic of Gilgamesh remains stubbornly immune to tidy categorisation, and the *Epic* and its hero continue to be inextricably interwoven.

Vogelzang and Vanstiphout (of the "Groningen Group") have stated that when analysing "Literature," there are two principles to keep in mind, firstly that each composition is autonomous, but each "is at the same time part of a system in the synchronic as well as the diachronic sense" (1992: 5). One product of Gilgamesh's modern day dominance over his heroic peers is the variety of approaches and contexts used to evaluate his story and character.

The observation of Vogelzang and Vanstiphout is particularly helpful for considering the contextual analysis of Gilgamesh. In one sense, each version of narratives involving Gilgamesh stands on its own feet. At the same time, repeated themes, plotlines, usages of language, characters, and geographical locations across the different versions makes them relatable to one another. Gilgamesh is also part of a broader cultural environment encompassing religious and societal values, the influence of which lie deeply embedded in the narrative, in ways that may be difficult to observe from a modern perspective, given our limited understanding of this environment. Further, Gilgamesh is part of the literary heritage of the Ancient Near East, and may be considered in contrast with the Hebrew Bible, the literature of the Classical world, and world folklore.

The choice of emphasising or privileging a particular ancient context for analyses of the subject of this book cannot help but shape the modern interpretation of Gilgamesh and his *Epic*. In this study, emphasis is placed on Gilgamesh as a Mesopotamian hero. This means viewing the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through the lens of a Mesopotamian cultural context, while being mindful of the limited modern

understanding of this context, as well as of the vast array of differences encompassed in this understanding in terms of social environments, periods and places.

This book also considers the character and narrative of Gilgamesh alongside other heroes of Mesopotamian myths and epics. This approach allows for the explorations of questions such as: what kind of Mesopotamian hero is Gilgamesh? In what ways might he be considered “typical,” and what about his story is distinctive? Attempting to place a fragmented collection of works into the context of a historical and cultural framing of which the modern understanding is still developing is an endeavour requiring a greater survey than can be provided in this volume. Yet, it is hoped that this approach will have the effect of more closely connecting the modern day understanding of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* with the cultural setting from which it originally developed.

Identifying Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh is the protagonist of the *Epic*, but the adventures that form his heroic journey are inextricably bound to his characterisation in literary texts and material culture. The acknowledgement of the symbiotic relationship between Gilgamesh and the stories which feature him as a leading character offers a point of confluence for much of the ancient Mesopotamian evidence surrounding the young king—and provides the basis for the thematic approach of this book.

The focus on identity and character here puts an emphasis on Gilgamesh as an individual. Recent research by Foster has demonstrated that there is ample evidence of a Mesopotamian sense of the “self,” relating to a person’s understanding of a unique identity, despite claims by some modern writers that these concepts post-dated the Mesopotamians (Foster, 2011).

As noted above, five Sumerian myths provide the earliest extant literary depiction of the hero’s story (Tigay, 1982: 13). In these narratives, familiar events of the hero’s story can be seen, such as the killing of the Bull of Heaven, the journey to the Cedar Forest, and the killing of Humbaba. These common elements of Gilgamesh’s story occur in the narrative sequences of the Sumerian myths, but they are also used to identify the hero, Gilgamesh.

After lord Gilgameš had arrived at the assembly, the pre-eminent place of the gods, they said to lord Gilgameš concerning him: “As regards your case: after having travelled all the roads that there

are, having fetched cedar, the unique tree, from its mountains, having killed Huwawa in his forest, you set up many stelae for future days, for days to come. Having founded many temples of the gods, you reached Zi-ud-sura in his {dwelling place}.

(*Death of Gilgamesh*, ETCSL 1.8.1.3)

The distinctive events from Gilgamesh's life are used by the deities to describe him upon the hero's arrival in the divine assembly. Similarly, the deeds which form the cornerstones of the hero's journey are used in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to identify him to Siduri, the divine ale-wife. Siduri first suspects Gilgamesh is a "slayer of wild bulls" when she sees him arrive from the Path of the Sun. Gilgamesh introduces himself by listing his great deeds, and then the deity displays her knowledge of Gilgamesh's identity by contrasting the individual of dishevelled appearance before her with the hero of a legendary narrative:

[If you and Enkidu were] the ones who killed the Guardian,
[Who destroyed] Humbaba, who lived in the Cedar Forest ...
[Who seized the Bull of Heaven and] killed [the Bull] of Heaven,
that came down from the heavens—
[why are your] cheeks [hollow], your face sunken,
[your mood wretched], your features wasted?

(SBV X: 36–41)

The worn figure of Gilgamesh in front of Siduri does not correspond to the image of the character who has performed the great and famous deeds. The young king explains the difference in his bearing as due to the demise of Enkidu, and the resulting grief and struggles that have consumed the hero following this new event in the story of his life.

Later in Tablet X, Gilgamesh identifies himself to Ur-Shanabi by recounting the same events from his life story that are familiar from the previous quotations above: the seizing and killing of the Bull of Heaven, and the destruction of the forest Guardian, Humbaba. In this second disclosure of his identity in the tablet, Gilgamesh also mentions as significant events his climb with Enkidu through the mountains (also found in *Death of Gilgamesh*), and his killing of lions. The close association between distinctive achievements and identity are given emphasis through repetition (considered in more detail in [Chapter 1](#)). The events of Gilgamesh's narrative, and his close relationships with Enkidu and Ninsun, provide identifying landmarks

for mapping the unique character of Gilgamesh.

The aim of this volume is to provide a useful overview of Gilgamesh, as well as some of the issues commonly raised in scholarly discourse, along with more detailed analysis of a selection of literary themes. The significance of literary themes in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has long been noted, with some notable works on this subject including those of Sasson (1972), Bailey (1976), and recently Helle (2016). A “theme” here is a repeated motif or idea that gives meaning and shape to a work. This definition of a theme assumes coherence in the narrative and character of Gilgamesh, even in light of the fragmented state of the evidence.

In this volume, we consider themes of the narrative that are generally accepted as holding particular prominence, such as death, kingship, and wisdom. Also explored are themes which, while significant, have perhaps not received a commensurate amount of attention. These themes, of animality, ecology, the complexity of warrior culture, and familial love are important components of the narrative, while also providing opportunities for the future use of the *Epic* and its hero in present day reflections on topics such as environmentalism, pacifism, and gender equality.

The selection of themes has been approached from the perspective of considering how these themes are related to the presentation of Gilgamesh’s identity. It is the view here that Gilgamesh’s identity is intertwined with the story of his adventures, and the *Epic* mirrors the identity of its protagonist in terms of thematic content. While the presentation of Gilgamesh’s image would have experienced some changes over time, and this image was reflected differently in different sources, the aim is to consider some aspects that appear to be at the very heart of the hero’s character.

It is possible that the modern-day scholarly tradition of the apologia had its genesis in Mesopotamia. Enheduanna, the world’s first individually identified author, appears to remark on her inability to sufficiently capture the complexity of her divine subject in her poetic praise of the goddess Inanna. Following in this ancient tradition, I note that the almost unlimited potential for scholarly analyses provided by Gilgamesh, combined with the fragmented and varied nature of the evidence, and the difficulties of a lack of clear context, carries the subject far outside the reach of a comprehensive overview in a single volume. Instead, the aim is to provide a broad view of the traditions surrounding Gilgamesh and a consideration of the *Epic*’s main themes, while noting its Mesopotamian cultural

context. In the process, some suggestions are made for new avenues of academic exploration, through foregrounding the importance of themes of animality and ecology, and the significance of Gilgamesh's familial relationships. The exploration of themes in each chapter relates to a unifying consideration of the identity of the *Epic of Gilgamesh's* young hero.

Who is Gilgamesh?

Gilgamesh is the world's first literary hero. His story may have originated through the oral tradition of story-telling, yet as noted earlier, this remains a topic of scholarly debate. The literary character of Gilgamesh may have been based upon a historical figure. The narrative lines of fiction, biography, and history—to use modern generic terms entirely foreign to the writers of Mesopotamian epic—show a tendency to overlap and overwrite one another in Mesopotamian epic literature.

In this book, the literary character of Gilgamesh is examined, using a range of written evidence, along with some visual sources. Yet the historical underpinnings of the story cannot be entirely discarded. Uruk, the geographical location of many of Gilgamesh's adventures, is a historical setting and many aspects of Gilgamesh's journeys reflect historical features of Mesopotamian culture, such as the importance of appropriate religious observance and the social and political institution of kingship. The fluidity of the epic genre, bridging the divide between fantasy and historical reality, adds to the dramatic weight of Gilgamesh's struggle with mortality.

The image of Gilgamesh in this book is largely drawn from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but is also informed by other literary sources such as Sumerian myths. The use of different genres, cultures, and traditions involved in the various sources illustrates the complexity and richness of the image of Gilgamesh, with the aim of reflecting the diversity of his image in the ancient world, and providing the opportunity to consider questions of coherence and differentiation between sources. The fragmented and diverse evidence for Gilgamesh reflects an image that, while by no means comprehensive, provides a basis for engaging transparently with the complexity and subtlety of the hero of Uruk.

A final chapter gives an examination of how Gilgamesh's story has been received outside the setting of its original audience in ancient Mesopotamia, both in antiquity and in the present day. By considering

a range of sources on the heroic king of Uruk, we gain a greater understanding of the diversity of his image and how this image may have been interpreted or changed by new audiences.

Of course, the question of influence is one that is always difficult to consider in absolute terms. The ancient sources, and even modern ones, rarely comment on the issue of influence explicitly, so an amount of interpretation cannot be avoided. Further, closeness in style or content between two works from different cultures has a limited ability to inform on the direction of any influence, and possible methods of cultural exchange or transmission. However, considering the reception of ancient works is of crucial importance in understanding ways in which changing modern contexts shape the appreciation of ancient literature.

An overview of the themes of this book

The sequencing of chapters here loosely follows the contours of Gilgamesh's narrative, to explore themes relating to his identity. The book begins with a consideration of Gilgamesh's identity as king of Uruk, moves to his heroic deeds and their setting in the natural environment, and then considers the transformational aspects of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. In the second half of the book we consider Gilgamesh's relationship to wisdom and death.

Kingship, death, and heroism are perhaps the most commonly noted themes considered in this book. Other significant aspects of the protagonist's identity, such as the contrasting elements of humanity and animality, and the influence of Gilgamesh's family and loved ones, are also explored. Through considering the diverse aspects of Gilgamesh's identity, we observe similar aspects in the shape of the *Epic* itself. Gilgamesh and his *Epic* exhibit a kind of symbiotic relationship in terms of identity. The intertwined nature of Gilgamesh's character and story means that the constituent elements of Gilgamesh's identity are frequently reflected in the narrative, through the prominence of themes of ecology, wisdom and love.

In [Chapter 1](#), Gilgamesh's identity as the king of Uruk is considered, with his role as monarch placing him at the apex of the Mesopotamian social order. Gilgamesh's kingship infuses his actions with lasting resonance; as the king of Uruk, he is responsible for the wellbeing of the city's inhabitants both physically and spiritually. The opening lines of the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic* tell us that

Gilgamesh was able to “surpass all other kings,” due to his ability to protect the city of Uruk, and enhance its culture through the acquisition of knowledge (King, 2009: 18). He begins the story as a tyrant, a king who acts like an animal. By the end of the narrative, Gilgamesh has grown into a man worthy of the crown of Uruk.

The kingship of Gilgamesh provides an important social and religious context for his actions and identity in several literary compositions. The presence of Utanapishtim in the narrative also provides significant meaning for Gilgamesh’s identification as a king.

[Chapter 2](#) explores Gilgamesh’s identification as a warrior and a hero, and his battles with his many opponents. Gilgamesh has heroic strength, but he is frequently assisted in battle by friendly gods, such as Shamash and Ea (Sumerian Enki), or his companion Enkidu. Although Gilgamesh’s combative exploits at times put him at odds with primary Mesopotamian deities, he is also shown to fight on behalf of gods, as is seen in the assistance he lends to Inanna in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. Gilgamesh’s identification as a warrior involves exceptional diversity, with variety shown in his motivations for combat, the changing nature of his adversaries, and the changes in his strategy over the course of the narrative. Gilgamesh’s battles are not purely physical; along with his great strength, he is also capable of trickery. He engages in a verbal joust with the goddess Ishtar, and his battle with Humbaba involves overcoming the auras of terror which clothed the monster.

Despite his at times overwhelming fear of death, Gilgamesh shows little concern for his safety in battle, committing himself entirely to the ideal of the powerful warrior who proves his worth through battle. Abusch has noted that, like the heroes of the *Iliad*, Gilgamesh’s success in battle comes with a price (2001: 616). While the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells of courageous deeds, it also shows the at times tragic repercussions of those deeds for the story’s hero. Gilgamesh’s conflicts further reflect the complex cultural interplay between combative deeds and concepts of virtue, glory and piety.

[Chapter 3](#) explores the hero in the context of the *Epic*’s theme of animality, as well as considering the presence of the natural world in the narrative setting of Gilgamesh’s adventures. Animality is one of the most significant themes in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but also one that has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. The animal actors in the *Epic* are portrayed with a mixture of natural realism (such as the emphasis on their economic value) and supernaturalism (the snake who eats the rejuvenating “heartbeat plant”). With Gilgamesh being a

king who is two-thirds divine and one-third human, animals provide an important counterpoint, or “other,” by which to gauge the protagonist’s progress.

Gilgamesh’s liminal status as one inhabiting a space midway between animal and deity has been astutely observed by Dickson (2007a: 176). When grieving for Enkidu, Gilgamesh is likened in the text to a circling eagle, and a mother lion separated from her cubs—he then clothes himself in the skin of a lion, further blurring the line between king and animal. By considering the depiction of animals in Gilgamesh, we can observe the remarkable permeability of the boundary between the human and animal worlds in the text, while further exploring the hero’s complex nature.

[Chapter 4](#) focuses on Gilgamesh’s experiences of love, family, and sexuality. The depiction of sexual relations in *Gilgamesh* is striking in its focus on sex as a pleasurable genital activity, rather than as an efficient means of procreation (Walls, 2001: 33). This emphasis is quite unusual in Mesopotamian mythology, where traditionally male sexual activity is considered in terms of reproductive efficiency, and sexual pleasure is associated with female lovers (Leick, 2008: 125). This chapter considers many types of love, and also explores the role of women in the *Epic*, particularly Gilgamesh’s relationship with his divine mother, Ninsun.

Gilgamesh’s most significant loving relationship is with his close companion Enkidu. Enkidu is an intriguing character. As Gilgamesh’s companion and servant, he shares in many of the hero’s adventures, both in the *Epic*, and in Sumerian myths. Enkidu is an intriguing character—he is created (like all of humanity in several Mesopotamian myths) by a mother goddess (in *Gilgamesh*, Aruru) out of clay, with his creation inspired by the desire to provide a companion for Gilgamesh. As Gilgamesh negotiates the conceptual boundaries of the animal, human and divine worlds, Enkidu, with his wild-man origins and at times reckless behaviour, provides a significant contrast to the hero and his characterisation in literature. In several literary compositions, the close pairing of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is separated by Enkidu’s death, sending Gilgamesh into an abyssopelagic period of grieving. Enkidu’s love is transformative for Gilgamesh. While alive, Enkidu inspires Gilgamesh to achieve great deeds, and when Enkidu dies, his loss sends Gilgamesh on a quest for meaning and immortality.

In [Chapter 5](#), the connection of Gilgamesh to wisdom is considered, along with the broader question of communication between divine

and mortal beings. It has been noted that, due to its small number of characters (relative to other “epics”) Semitic versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* involve a high number of dialogues throughout the composition (the dialogic content is considered in Denning-Bolle, 1987). Communication between mortals and immortals is a common feature in Mesopotamian legendary epics, but it is not always presented as a smooth and direct process. Even the quasi-divine Gilgamesh has trouble interpreting the divine messages found in his dreams, and he requires the help of others to attempt to gain meaning from them. While Gilgamesh’s mother, Ninsun, is effective at assisting in the interpretation of Gilgamesh’s dreams, Enkidu’s efforts to decipher the meaning of a series of dreams seem to result in a breakdown in communication between the heroes and the gods.

The theme of wisdom in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has doubtlessly had a central role in its continued fascination. In [Chapter 5](#), the complex areas of wisdom and wisdom literature in Mesopotamia are considered. Gilgamesh’s pursuit of knowledge, and his gaining of wisdom, shape his character and the content of his narrative. There is great diversity to the presentation of the theme of wisdom in *Gilgamesh*, yet Gilgamesh’s access to wisdom is connected to his royal role, and his identification with chthonic rituals in broader traditions.

[Chapter 6](#) considers the role of death in *Gilgamesh*. Mesopotamian kingship involved a type of immortality, in terms of the continuation of the role through generations, despite the reality of each individual ruler’s mortality. In [Chapter 6](#), Gilgamesh’s search for a more personal form of immortality is explored. Early in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero expresses a concern at the heart of the human condition—the brevity of life and desire to leave a legacy. He says that all man ever did is “wind,” with the implication that human life passes quickly (compared to the timespans inhabited by immortals), and leaves no trace. In the first half of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh endeavours to make a lasting name for himself through heroic acts. Following the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s focus shifts towards avoiding death entirely, through the attainment of the secret to eternal life. Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality leads him literally to the very edges of the earth. Gilgamesh’s quest also leads him to the Mesopotamian fountain of youth, the *amurdinnu* or “heartbeat” plant, with its fantastic powers of rejuvenation. Searching for immortality and eternal youth, first recorded in the *Epic*, has been a continual presence in human thought and culture throughout history. Although Gilgamesh must learn to accept his mortality, the narrative provides the perspective that the

lasting nature of humanity's shared efforts may at least partially overcome and limit the impermanence that is part of the mortal condition.

In his manifestation as a hero in the *Epic*, Gilgamesh is deeply focused on his mortality, however, the issue of Gilgamesh's mortality and immortality is complicated by his role in other Mesopotamian literature. Indeed, the first known written reference to Gilgamesh comes from the Fara god list, dating from around 2600 BCE, where he is listed as a deity. Outside of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh is at times presented as a god, and in some later texts, he is a judge in the Underworld. In the Sumerian poem *The Death of Ur-Nammu*, Gilgamesh appears alongside the primary Mesopotamian deities of the Netherworld, Ereshkigal and Nergal. Gilgamesh's unique experience of mortality, death, immortality and divinity means he spans an exceptional range of natural and supernatural existence, yet his special mixture of divine and human qualities do not always blend easily, as can be seen in Gilgamesh's attempts to test and supersede his own limits.

The final chapter of the book is focused on the reception of the character of Gilgamesh, and his *Epic*, by later audiences. This chapter is divided in two sections, both considering the reception of Gilgamesh, but divided along temporal lines. First, the chapter explores the *Epic's* connections to other Western and Ancient Near Eastern literature, such as Greek epic and the Bible. In the second half of the chapter, the later reception of Gilgamesh in popular culture is considered. As noted above, attempts to draw parallels between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and other great works of literature from a variety of cultures have been a feature of scholarly approaches to Gilgamesh's story since almost the moment of its rediscovery. Was the lion-skin of Herakles a hand-me-down? Did Odysseus' fantastical journey cover some well-known paths? How can attempts to quantify the exchange of literary influences inform modern audiences on the functions and cultural significance of ancient literature?

Unlike many heroes from Classical Antiquity, Gilgamesh and his *Epic* were only rediscovered in the mid-19th century. The first modern translation of the ancient composition was published by George Smith in 1873 (Maier, 1997b: 1–2), with the text then becoming available to a wide audience following the First World War. The Sumerian myths relating to Gilgamesh have only recently become accessible in translation, with the myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* not becoming widely available until the 20th century. Despite this, a

growing field of scholarship is dedicated to exploring the influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on other works of literature from the ancient world.

Although Gilgamesh is undoubtedly less widely known in the modern day than many Classical heroes, his story is one that has been embraced by audiences in the present day—a phenomenon known as “Gilgameshiana.” The “contemporary absorption” in Gilgameshiana has provided inspiration for artists in a wide range of media (Sasson, 2005). The hero’s story is the subject of several operas and plays, a ballet, and pantomimes. He has also appeared on television series and in films, as well as in modern literary compositions including works of historical fiction and in comic books. The varied approaches to the Gilgamesh myth show the continued relevance of the world’s oldest hero, who in the present day continues to fascinate modern audiences, while surpassing cultural and temporal divides.

Conclusion

Gilgamesh, the legendary literary hero, is found in a range of manifestations. He is a liminal character, one born destined for kingship but who struggles against his own humanity. Gilgamesh provides a unique perspective to consider many foundational aspects of Mesopotamian life, such the significance of love and family, the conceptualisation of death and the nature of religious observance.

Heroes in the ancient world are in many ways defined by death; generally speaking it is their mortality that separates them from deities—although the definition of “hero” and the relation of heroes to death is a complicated issue (Ekroth, 2015). Gilgamesh’s journeys are linked through his attempts to find permanency in a changing and ephemeral existence. While Gilgamesh fails in his quest for immortality, the continuing appreciation of his story provides a kind of permanency through his enduring literary legacy.

Gilgamesh in the modern day has become a cultural symbol for the great civilisations of ancient Mesopotamia. While this means Gilgamesh at times overshadows other significant literary works, and indeed, his fellow Mesopotamian heroes, the undeniable appeal of Gilgamesh gives a hopeful perspective on future efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of Mesopotamia.

Gilgamesh is shown in this volume to be a somewhat elusive figure. The mysterious quality of Gilgamesh comes from the fragmented and

difficult-to-contextualise state of the evidence surrounding him, but this enigmatic quality has also fuelled scholarly debate and general interest in this most ancient of heroes. Gilgamesh is not a “perfect” figure, in fact, he often seems an awkward fit in his role as king. The rebelliousness and irreverence of Gilgamesh’s behaviour are likely part of the cause for his continuing popularity—Gilgamesh is often depicted starting fights he cannot win, and chasing things which will forever elude him, however following Gilgamesh on his many quests is never dull.

A recent exhibition on heroes from the American comic book publisher, DC comics, in Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum noted the duality of heroism; the ability of light to cast shadows, and the relative nature of concepts of “good” and “evil” (2015). Gilgamesh—having himself been manifested as a DC comic hero in the late eighties—adheres in some ways to this concept of dualism; in his adventures, he shows at various times a combination of fear and courage, piety and sacrilege, mercy and cruelty, and mortality and immortality. Despite the mixture of many seemingly conflicting personality traits in a single figure, Gilgamesh remains recognisable as an archetypal hero. His complexities give depth and credibility to his characterisation and confers timeless meaning to his story.



Key themes



1

Kingship

Mesopotamian literature holds a remarkable catalogue of heroes and kings who achieved exceptional feats. Gilgamesh, among them, is unique in many ways, but also part of a larger literary tradition of royals and heroes. Some royal characters are historical, with their stories presented in royal inscriptions and epics. Others are legendary figures, battling supernatural enemies and overcoming problems with magical solutions. These varied literary figures may be drawn together by their identification as kings. In this chapter, Gilgamesh's identity as a king is explored, in light of the political, social, and religious responsibilities of the institution.

In the Introduction to this volume, it was observed that Gilgamesh's identity, in a variety of sources, is intertwined with the story of his adventures. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* mirrors the identity of its protagonist in terms of thematic content, and follows the contours of the changes in his character. The role of kingship is fundamental for shaping the arc of Gilgamesh's characterisation. In this chapter, emphasis is given to the sacred aspects of the king's position, particularly in terms of the dispensation of justice and the maintenance of cosmic order.

The theme of kingship is foundational to the narrative of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and to the identity of its eponymous protagonist. This theme involves communications between humans and deities, the nature of leadership, and the genre of wisdom (also considered in [Chapter 5](#)). Kingship is explored in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through the character of Gilgamesh, but also through the depiction of the legendary Flood survivor, Utanapishtim. This chapter considers how the character of Utanapishtim provides a model of ideal kingship, one which leads Gilgamesh to eventual acceptance of his social position, and back to civilisation. It is through his contact with the elder king that Gilgamesh develops his famous wisdom—a crucial quality for

successful leadership.

The analysis of Gilgamesh's characterisation as a king here is based primarily on the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Later in the chapter, his role as king in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh and Aga* is considered, and used as a point of comparison for the hero's characterisation. In both compositions, Gilgamesh's identity as king is important for the structure of the narrative, his characterisation, and his interactions with others. The Sumerian story provides a different perspective on Gilgamesh the king, contrasted against his role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh's royal role had a significant cultural impact beyond the world of epic, with his image used in the literature and material culture of historical kings. The role of Mesopotamian king is essential to Gilgamesh's identity and the shape of his story.

Kingship and religion in Mesopotamia

The depiction of the theme of kingship in *Gilgamesh* reflects the historical institution of kingship in Mesopotamia. While the portrayal of kingship in *Gilgamesh* cannot be considered to provide a representation fully reflective of the historical monarchy, Gilgamesh's royal role is grounded in an ancient political institution which held a central role in the organisation of Mesopotamian society. There is a good deal of "cross-over" in terms of royal ideology and imagery between the historical reality of kingship and its fictional portrayal. To better understand how kingship in *Gilgamesh* is presented, it is useful to first explore what is known of the historical institution, to give some context to the institution's depiction in literature.

The emergence of urban civilisations in Egypt and Mesopotamia at the end of the fourth millennium BCE transformed the structure of society. This transformation is most clearly seen in the political sphere with the development and consolidation of the institution of kingship.

Mesopotamian kingship originated in Southern Mesopotamia (Grottanelli and Mander, 2005: 5162), with the first written evidence for divine kingship generally dated to the rule of Naram-Sin of Akkad in the Old Akkadian period. The evidence for Naram-Sin's divinity is shown through the use of the divine classifier before his name, and also through visual means, with his wearing of a horned crown associated with divine leadership (although Winter has argued that if indeed the horned crown of Naram-Sin indicated a godly status, it

would be that of a very minor deity; 2008: 76).

As noted by Michalowski in his chapter on the mortal kings of Ur: “Naram-Sin’s short time as a god on earth was singular and was neither inheritable nor contagious” (2008: 35), and the use of the divine determinative by a king was next assumed by Shulgi of Ur, over a hundred years later. Naram-Sin is the royal protagonist of the *Cuthean Legend*, a composition sharing several features in common with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. These features include an emphasis on the importance of the transmission of expertise through royal succession. The absence of instructions from a previous king leads to trouble for Naram-Sin in his efforts to successfully inhabit his royal role, drawing comparisons with Gilgamesh’s problematic reign in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic*. Like Gilgamesh, the *Cuthean Legend* was initially translated by George Smith (Westenholz, 1997: 7).

Despite continued shifts in the ideology of kingship over the millennia that followed (see, for example, Jacobsen, 1970a: 132–156), the theological basis of royal power in Mesopotamia is evident from the time of the earliest royal inscriptions (Westenholz, 2000: 75). The worlds of divine and earthly politics were hierarchically ordered, with the gods emphatically in the dominant position over humans.

In a chapter exploring the intersection of death, divinity, and royal authority in Mesopotamia, Scurlock showed that the monarch’s role was both defined and circumscribed by heavy religious obligation, with his position more ideologically predicated on responsibility than on power (2013: 172). Kingship was perceived as a divine gift; the royal office was thought by the Mesopotamians to have descended from the heavens. The connection between the Mesopotamian king and deities was divinely inspired yet the bond was continuing, dynamic, and reciprocal. The presentation in *Gilgamesh* of the royal rulership of Uruk being monitored by deities reflects the close historical connection of divinity and kingship in Mesopotamia.

Communication and mediation

Communication is an important theme in *Gilgamesh*. In the Flood narrative, communication takes on a vital significance (considered in [Chapter 7](#)), and the giving of wisdom is generally transmitted orally. This emphasis on communication in *Gilgamesh* gives a sense of the historical perspective of communication between royals and deities. To give greater context to the presentation of this theme in *Gilgamesh*, a short summary of the topic is provided here.

Positive communication between historical kings and

Mesopotamian divinities was necessary for the king's success in the role of leader. Deities were thought to constantly guide the ruler in his leadership role, and assist in decision making (Radner, 2009: 221). In a chapter exploring the presence of foreign scholars in Neo-Assyrian courts, Radner observed that divine wishes and guidance were communicated through signs that were "encountered everywhere in the natural world, their creation," with these signs being monitored and interpreted for the king by various scholarly advisors (Radner, 2009: 221).

To ensure successful communication, scholarly advisors and religious specialists were employed to "monitor and interpret the messages of the gods and to perform the rituals necessary to keep the precious relationship with the divine powers in balance" (Radner, 2009: 221).

The king's role in keeping cosmic balance was divinely moderated and reliant on clear communication, which was facilitated by the correct interpretation of signs and omens. The failure of a king to heed the warnings of divination, leading to disaster and death, formed a key plot element of the *Cuthean Legend*. The historical reality of the connection of kingship and divination is also reflected in *Gilgamesh*, where the interpretation of signs and dreams could prove the difference between failure and success, and Gilgamesh is reliant on the good advice of those around him.

A small number of Mesopotamian kings were themselves worshipped as divine. This practice of deifying living kings was limited to short periods of history (Brisch, 2013), with the kings involved mostly belonging to the Sargonic, Ur III, and Isin dynasties. The question of the divinity or otherwise of Mesopotamian kings is an area of great complexity, and has been the focus of much productive scholarship (see recently *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, 2008, edited by Nicole Brisch).

In the Ur III period, historical kings aligned themselves ideologically and politically with the legendary rulers of Uruk, such as Gilgamesh. The "awkwardly combined" concepts of the king's divinity and the principle of heavenly election meant a kind of compromise on the issue of divine kingship in this period (Steinkeller, 2017: 38). The problematic combination of divine appointment with individual divinity in this period holds interesting parallels with the complex issue of Gilgamesh's own quasi-divine yet divinely-elected status as king.



Figure 1.1Uruk in 2008. Image by SAC Andy Holmes (RAF/MoD). Image available for reuse through Open Government Licence (OGL). www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

In the historical human realm, authority was rooted in the office of the king, with various regional administrative offices branching from this central role. The bureaucracy surrounding the central position of king is represented in the *Gilgamesh* epic through the elders of the city of Uruk. The role of king was “legitimised by the gods, demonstrated through ritual and reinforced by tradition” (Hill, Jones, and Morales, 2013: 4). In a culture where deities were the source of life and responsible for the maintenance of universal order, concepts of power and religion were tightly interwoven.

Mesopotamian kings could present themselves as having special and unusually close bonds with the divine, and even belonging to the immediate family of the primary deities. Despite their special connection to the immortal world of deities, human kings, like legendary heroes, faced the realities and limitations of mortality.

The mixture of divine and mortal qualities involved in kingship made the Mesopotamian king particularly well qualified for literary explorations of the boundaries of humanity. The special role of Mesopotamian kings has been described as inhabiting the position of the “vertex” of humanity—the point where the horizontal mortal world was connected to the vertical heavens (Grottanelli and Mander, 2005: 5163). Kings were well placed for mediating between humanity and the divine, and the office of kingship was essential in maintaining

universal order. The effective maintenance of cosmological order involved the use of royal rituals (Noegel, 2007b).

The primary position of monarch in ancient Mesopotamia was a masculine role; the throne was generally held by a king (for some noteworthy exceptions, see Westenholz, 2000: 89). The nature of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia was not static across all periods, and this variability resulted in changes in the relationship between the monarch and the pantheon.

The relationship of Gilgamesh to various Mesopotamian deities is a significant aspect of his epic, and these relationships also feature prominently in Sumerian myths featuring Gilgamesh. The hero's success and indeed, his very survival, are contingent on the good will and intercession of primary Mesopotamian deities, yet at times he behaves impiously and displays a lack of proper concern for maintaining his good relations with the divine. The hero's desire to achieve a type of immortality through lasting fame at times places him at odds with his religious and royal responsibilities, an issue explored in greater detail here.

Royal epics (and epic royals)

It is important to note the significance of the theme of kingship in the development, transmission, and survival of stories of the Gilgamesh's adventures. The relationship between Mesopotamian epic and historical kingship has very early origins. Noegel has argued that there is no doubt that the "increasingly powerful institution of kingship played a significant role in the creation and promulgation of the earliest epic poems" (2005: 243).

Connections between Mesopotamian kingship and royal propaganda have formed the basis of several scholarly analyses. These scholarly analyses have considered the juxtaposition of kingship and royal propaganda in epic literature and the visual arts. Epics, focused on the exceptional deeds of legendary kings, created a sense of cultural identity and prestige surrounding the role of king—this high stature for the office of kingship was further enhanced by the close bonds between deities and kings seen in epic poetry. The prestige surrounding the legendary rulers of epic—some of whom were worshipped as deities—could be accessed by the historical kings of Mesopotamia through imagery, royal epic, and claims of ancestral ties to the literary heroes. An example of this relationship can be seen in

allusions to Gilgamesh in the royal imagery of Naram-Sin, King of Akkad (Winter, 2010: 85–102).

The connection to historical monarchs in the preservation and consumption of *Gilgamesh* should not be taken as evidence that the epic poetry of ancient Mesopotamia was unquestioningly biased in favour of kingship. Indeed, the challenges and complexity of the institution of kingship, and the responsibilities and rights involved in the office, are foregrounded in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Sasson has observed the literary device of the “bard” introducing the audience to Gilgamesh’s flaws in the Semitic version of the *Epic*, so that the audience may experience the hero’s choices in the narrative with a sense of judgement (2005: 225).

Surpassing all other kings ...

Of course, it is difficult to gauge what kind of an impression of its hero the *Epic of Gilgamesh* left with contemporary audiences. Determining the reactions of diverse historical groups to artistic works is an ephemeral endeavour, the passage of thousands of years of time notwithstanding. Yet it seems probable that the audience of the *Epic* was likely to have considered the character of Gilgamesh against the backdrop of the historical institution of kingship, and in the context of other heroic and royal peers from ancient literary and oral traditions. From this perspective, Gilgamesh appears as a man whose actions are more in line with divine heroes, such as Ninurta, than legendary Sumerian kings such as Lugalbanda.

Gilgamesh’s unique approach to leadership creates tension in the narrative with his identification in the *Epic* as the king of Uruk, and develops a sense of suspense in the story around how he will come to fill this crucial role. As von Marco Shateri astutely notes, Gilgamesh’s twin roles in epic literature as king and hero at times make for an uneasy fit (2011).

As king, Gilgamesh moderates and dispenses the power of the state, yet as a hero he relies on violence and his own strength to surmount obstacles (von Marco Shateri, 2011). To complicate the issue, Pongratz-Leisten makes a compelling case in her monograph on religion and ideology in Assyria for the necessity for masculine power and vigour in successful leadership in the Mesopotamian worldview (2015).

Considering the observations of Pongratz-Leisten alongside the arguments of von Marco Shateri, it seems that it is the divine sanctioning of royal aggression through which the ruler is lent

authority and approval. The frequently questionable behaviour of Gilgamesh in his interactions with divinity, then, requires further exploration.

Gilgamesh the king: “fact” or “fiction?”

Literary works such as “myths” and “epics” present a mixture of supernatural and more historical elements. This blending of “fact” and “fiction” is pervasive in ancient Mesopotamian compositions, and present in the narrative settings, plots, and characters of this literature. The mixture of the natural and supernatural in Mesopotamian literature makes challenging work of modern attempts to divide the “historical” from the fantastic.

Although these types of divisions are useful for scholarly discourse, it is important to reflect on the ancient context of this blended quality of the literature. The capacity of the composers of Mesopotamian literature to blur the bounds of the mortal and immortal worlds, and the distinctive and easy manner in which they employed this ability, gives insight into cultural and religious concepts and an ancient worldview. In a modern world which at times struggles to separate the sacred from the secular, the blended nature of Mesopotamian literature provides an entry point for considering the historical and religious contexts of the texts.

Kingship and the gods

Religious activities are a constant presence in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The protagonist himself is quasi-divine, his relatives are deities, and there are frequent descriptions of prayers, oaths, and sacrifices. To provide further context for the religiosity of Gilgamesh, a summary of the topic is given here.

Religion was a central and dynamic aspect of ancient Mesopotamian life, culture, and identity, during all periods. Religious ideas, imagery, and meaning permeated every aspect of daily life. This “embedded” quality of religion creates difficulties in terms of providing sure parameters in which to situate any academic discourse (Pryke, 2017a). In literature, the embedded quality of religion is reflected in the prevalence of divine and quasi-divine elements in narratives that in the modern day might be considered predominately (although often not exclusively) secular, such as royal annals.

“Religion” as such is notoriously hard to define, as Geertz (1999) and others have shown. Defining Mesopotamian religion presents special challenges particularly relating to the broad expanses of temporal and geographical areas collected under this term, as well as the difficulties of contextualising the often-fragmented evidence (these issues are briefly outlined in Pryke, 2017a).

Ancient Mesopotamian religion is broadly defined in this volume as a combination of what ancient Mesopotamians said about the gods, including their relationship to humans, and what humans did in response. This admittedly simple and utilitarian definition is aimed towards giving some focus to this study (for an in-depth consideration of the topic and related issues the reader is directed to recent specialised and detailed studies, particularly Hruša, 2015, and Lambert, 2016). The definition here is made in the awareness that Mesopotamian religion is a fluid notion, and an area where scholarly interpretations are rapidly transitioning. Indeed, it is thought that any attempt at a systematic account of Mesopotamian religion must remain incomplete (Böck, 2015).

In earlier scholarship, Mesopotamian deities were considered as dominantly anthropomorphic, yet recent work has demonstrated that “deities” in Mesopotamia could be identified with natural phenomena, take astral forms, or be non-anthropomorphic and non-animate (see Porter, 2011). Feuerherm has noted the close connection of Mesopotamian deities and the natural environment in terms of perception, and nicely elucidates the variable nature of the Mesopotamian “pantheon”:

The deities who from time to time or place to place comprised the Mesopotamian pantheon represented at their root concretizations of the Mesopotamian experience of the environment.

(Feuerherm, 2015: 84)

The conceptual structure which allowed for the comparison, segregation or joint consideration of Mesopotamian deities was the pantheon. Like the ancient Greeks of the Classical period, the ancient Mesopotamians were polytheistic in their worship, and like the ancient Greeks, the deities that filled their pantheons showed variation at different periods and locations (Pryke, 2017a: 11). The composition and structure of the Mesopotamian pantheon was not static. Different cities and geographical locations had their own pantheons, which changed over time, and these panthea reflected

different spheres of religious experience (Rubio, 2011: 92).

One element of this dynamic quality was the tendency for deities to be associated with “abstract physical concepts beyond the immediately environmental” (Feuerhern, 2015: 84). The perception of Mesopotamian divinities is further clouded by the fluidity of their representations between texts, genres, and periods—also a feature of material culture (Ornan, 2009).

In a chapter considering the origins of Mesopotamian deities, Vanstiphout provided a useful collection of qualities and powers often associated with divinity in Mesopotamian religion. These include omnipresence, immortality, omniscience, omnipotence, and guardianship or responsibility (2009). These properties assist in defining Mesopotamian divinity, but attempts to clarify further risk reaching beyond the scope of the evidence.

Indeed, the question of where humanity ends and divinity begins is a theme that formed the basis of many ancient Mesopotamian epics, such as *Adapa and the South Wind*, and of course, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The presence of themes of humanity, mortality and immortality in Mesopotamian epic literature suggests that these questions were of interest to the ancient Mesopotamian producers and consumers of this literature, as much as for modern-day audiences. These literary works rather raise the issues than provide clear answers, however, the capacity for immortality, and to inhabit a dominant status in cosmic hierarchy, are frequently expressed divine qualities across a variety of written and material sources.

It is the view here that hierarchy and status are particularly important for understanding Mesopotamian divinity, and in this respect Gilgamesh, with his quasi-divinity, kingly status, and persistent mortality makes for a fascinating point of study.

Although as noted earlier there are a variety of forms for Mesopotamian divinities, in Mesopotamian epic literature deities frequently appear in anthropomorphic form. Despite their human-like form, deities are presented with extraordinary abilities and qualities—like heroes. The similarity of heroes and deities in this area is useful for exploring the boundary between the human and divine worlds. It is worth noting Gradel’s analysis of divinity in Roman religion (originally applied to Ancient Near Eastern religion by Pongratz-Leisten, 2011: 5–6), where the human-deity divide is considered as an issue involving distinctions in status, rather than a distinction in nature (2002).

The combination of supernatural and human qualities in deities has

been discussed by Benavides, who observes that divine qualities can be understood as being shaped by the projection of intensified human characteristics upon supernatural beings:

God concepts, then, emerge as the result of two mutually reinforcing, if contradictory, processes: on the one hand, the desire to leave behind the limitations that afflict us and, on the other, the tendency—almost inescapable—to conceive the world as if it were populated by beings analogous to us, with human-like bodies, appetites, and minds; hence the tendency to generate anthropomorphic divinities—as visible in ancient Mesopotamia, the ancient Mediterranean world and classical Greece, as in contemporary India—much as those divine bodies, appetites, and minds may require to be transfigured to ensure that they are not identical to ours—or, in the language of cognitivists, to achieve the optimal degree of counterintuitiveness.

(Benavides, 2017: 564)

While deities and heroes had much in common (and many areas of overlap), the power of immortality provided a general point of distinction. As noted in the *Epic*, heroes, like less heroic mortals, live for limited amounts of time (*Gilgamesh* SBV X: 319–322). The mortal timeframe of earthly existence is relatively brief, unpredictable, and generally dependent on the goodwill of the ruling deities. Deities, conversely, could live for an unlimited amount of time.

Although deities were considered to be immortal, they could engage in mortal-like behaviour. Deities engaged frequently in sexual relations (often but not exclusively with other deities), and could also become unwell (see for example the Sumerian myth of *Enki and Ninhursag*), and even die.

The myth of *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld* famously involves the death of the goddess of love, Ishtar, at the hands of her sister, Ereshkigal. In the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, the personified primordial ocean, Tiamat, is killed through a battle with Marduk, instituting a “new order,” and guaranteeing the continuation of the cosmos (Foster, 2012: 22). In both cases, it is possible to view the deaths or conflicts of deities resulting in benefits for mortals. Ishtar's death may have been viewed as allowing for the special powers of the Netherworld to be brought to the upper world (Zgoll, 2017), and Marduk creates the heavens and the earth from Tiamat's body. In life and death, and on heaven and earth, humans and deities

were closely connected and involved in a relationship of significant reciprocity in Mesopotamian religion.

Texts describing literary kings and heroes are not easily categorised in terms of “genre” (see the Introduction for considerations on Mesopotamian literary genres). Royal epics show a blending of historical writing and fiction that blurs the already indistinct line between literary styles. Royal biographies of historical kings can include mythical elements, while the stories of legendary heroes such as Gilgamesh may have developed from famous historical figures. The potential historicity of Gilgamesh is often considered with reference to his appearance in the *Sumerian King List*. In this ancient composition, Gilgamesh is listed as the 5th ruler of Uruk, reigning around 2700 BCE (Tigay, 1982: 13–16), although it is generally accepted that the *Sumerian King List* is “far from a dispassionate chronicle of events” (Postgate, 2017: 28).

Many royal epics contain motifs very close to those that appear in the epics of legendary heroes. The Akkadian epics of King Sargon (ca. 2334–2279 BCE), such as *Sargon in the lands beyond the cedar forest*, and *Sargon and the Lord of Purushkhanda* (also known as the *King of Battle* epic), hold several features in common with well-known episodes from *Gilgamesh*. The composition known as the *Epic of Sargon* involves the king’s ability to avoid a trap set by Ur-Zababa of Kish by reading a cuneiform document. The connection of Sargon to Ur-Zababa is noted in the *Sumerian King List*, and this composition contains legendary and historical rulers (van de Mieroop, 1999: 63–64). Alster observes that Sargon’s epic reading subtly alludes to the invention of cuneiform referenced in the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (1999, also noted in Noegel, 2005: 238).

The merging of myth and history in legendary and royal epic gives the epic “genre” a mixed quality that is well-suited to exploring themes of religion and humanity. The compositions, like their heroic protagonists, contain elements of human historical reality juxtaposed with supernatural features. The connection between heroic kings and kingly heroes blurs the line between fact and fiction, and between human and “superhuman.”

The close connection of kings with the legendary hero Gilgamesh gave prestige to the historical monarchy and longevity to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic*’s links to royal patronage, along with its use in ancient scribal schools, are significant elements in the story’s longevity.

What does your father do?

The historical institution of kingship in Mesopotamia was divinely established, and the throne was generally, but not exclusively, transferred from father to son (see Postgate, 2017, for alternative means of succession). While considering the patrilineal aspect of kingship, it is timely to consider the complicated question of Gilgamesh's genealogy.

In the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, is one of the primary characters, with a powerful influence on the narrative. In contrast, Gilgamesh's father is predominately absent.

This volume considers Gilgamesh's identity within the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and in broader traditions involving the hero. The topic of family is one of great significance to Gilgamesh's character, but in several sources, Gilgamesh's paternity shows some ambiguity.

Sumerian narratives involving Gilgamesh give Lugalbanda as Gilgamesh's father, and this relationship is implied in the Standard Babylonian Version (George, 2003: 106). In Tablet I, Ninsun and Lugalbanda appear to be presented as Gilgamesh's parents:

Wild Bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgameš, perfect of strength,
Suckling of the exalted cow, Wild-Cow Ninsun!

(SBV I: 35–36)

Lugalbanda is also later referred to as Gilgamesh's god:

(Gilgamesh) dedicated (them) for the anointing of his god,
Lugalbanda.

(SBV VI: 165)

The courting of Ninsun and Lugalbanda is referenced in praise poems of Shulgi of Ur, who refers to Gilgamesh as his friend and brother. The courtship of Gilgamesh's parents is also known from the composition known as *Lugalbanda and Ninsuna*, published among a large collection of tablets from Tell Abu Salabikh in modern-day Iraq (see Biggs, 1974). The translation by Jacobsen here gives a sense of the close relationship between the two deities:

Wise Lugalbanda passed the arm around cherub Ninsuna, could not resist kissing (her) on the eyes, could not resist kissing (her) on the mouth, also taught her much love making.

In other texts, Gilgamesh's father is noted as uncertain. The Hittite version of *Gilgamesh* implies he arrived in Uruk from parts unknown, and both of his parents are omitted from the main narrative. Instead, the Hittite *Gilgamesh* shows the hero being divinely created in what might be called "Pandora style," with various deities gifting him with different qualities (Foster, 2001: 157–158).

The *Sumerian King List* states that Gilgamesh's father was a "lillu," or a phantom. Sources from Ur, such as the Meturan version of the *Death of Gilgamesh*, appear to reflect the idea that Gilgamesh's parents were both mortal (Gadotti, 2014: 123–124). The tradition of Gilgamesh's fathering by the hero Lugalbanda, who was deified after death, has general acceptance as the most widely attested attribution of paternity for Gilgamesh.

Lugalbanda

Gilgamesh was not the only offspring noted in literature to result from Lugalbanda's parentage; the historical Sumerian kings Shulgi and Ur-Nammu claim to be his offspring. If the legendary Lugalbanda is based on an historical person (as might be necessary to support royal claims of paternity), it is thought that his reign would have occurred around 2800–2700 BCE (Noegel, 2005: 235).

Lugalbanda was a prominent figure in Mesopotamian literature and was a "culture-hero" (Black, 2006: 1) who features as the protagonist in several narratives, most famously *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave*, and *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*.

Lugalbanda in (and out) of the Gilgamesh epic

In comparison to his divine spouse, Ninsun, Lugalbanda does not have a prominent role in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. He appears as a recipient of offerings from Gilgamesh, following the death of the Bull of Heaven (SBV VI: 165), where Lugalbanda is described as Gilgamesh's "personal god" (see Cavigneaux and Renger, 2000: 96–97).

The religious piety shown by Gilgamesh towards Lugalbanda in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may be contrasted against his actions in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*. In the earlier myth, Gilgamesh uses Lugalbanda's name to swear a false oath to his enemy,

Huwawa (Humbaba in the Semitic versions), in order to get Huwawa to part with his special weapon, the seven Auras of Terror:

And a fifth time he (Gilgamesh) addressed him (Huwawa): “By the life of my mother Ninsun and of my father, holy Lugalbanda! ... Just hand over your terrors to me! I want to become your kinsman!” Then Huwawa handed over to him his fifth terror.

(*Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, version A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

Lugalbanda’s absence from the action of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an important element in the story’s narrative structure. In the *Epic*, the influence of close family relations on character and status is an important theme, as we see with the characters of Enkidu and Humbaba in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#). Although the absence of Gilgamesh’s father is not explicitly presented as a problem in the narrative, the issue underwrites many of the early events of the hero’s journey.

Having inherited kingship, Gilgamesh could expect to also inherit the advice, support, and wisdom of his father, the king preceding him. Instead, Gilgamesh takes counsel from Ninsun and Enkidu, with mixed results. Lugalbanda’s connection to kingship is an important theme of his own epic adventures in Sumerian literature, particularly in regard to succession (Alster, 1990: 64).

While Lugalbanda is not an obvious presence in the narrative, Gilgamesh is provided with a male royal “role model”—although he must travel a very long way to find him. Utanapishtim, the Flood survivor, provides Gilgamesh with the necessary insight to fully accept his position as king of Uruk. The presence of the paternal figure of Utanapishtim at the end of the *Epic*, and the maternal figure of Ninsun at the beginning, gives balance to the account of Gilgamesh’s guardians and parental figures.

Use (and misuse) of power

The Mesopotamian king of epic poetry inhabited the indistinct realm dividing the mortal and divine spheres, a role that held great significance for the king’s city and subjects, as well as for his own identity. This relationship reflected the historical reality of the king’s role in assisting the gods to maintain cosmic order. While positive relationships between the king and divinities led to blessings and good fortune for the ruler and the people over whom he ruled, a break-

down in communication between the divine and mortal realms could lead to disaster.

The awareness of the primacy of the causal link between divine happiness and mortal prosperity can be seen in its continuing use as a narrative theme across numerous Mesopotamian works of literature, but perhaps most prominently in the Babylonian Flood narrative. In this story, which is embedded within the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the importance of communication and harmony between the divine and human worlds is emphasised.

Several other Mesopotamian heroes, such as Lugalbanda and Enmerkar, seek divine favour to assist in their ruling, and serve the Mesopotamian deities faithfully. Gilgamesh, in contrast, has a fractious and complicated relationship with the deities who appear in his epic, and his religious life is frequently marred by questionable sacred practices. In the Semitic versions of the narrative, Gilgamesh's diversion from the expected religious role of an historical king is most overtly portrayed in his relationship with Ishtar, the goddess of love and social connections.

In Tablet VI, Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's offer of marriage, an action clearly at odds with the expected behaviour of a Mesopotamian king. Marriage to the goddess of love was seen to provide blessings, abundance, and joy for the city and its community in royal praise poetry, but Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar results in malediction, drought, and mourning.

The unhappy consequences of the rejection provide a distorted reflection of the expected outcome of the divine marriage, emphasising the serious consequences of Gilgamesh's disregard for his role in maintaining the religious welfare of Uruk. His actions are also at odds with the behaviour of other legendary literary heroes (considered in Pryke, 2017a).

The consequences of Gilgamesh's actions affect the city negatively: instead of drawing the community together in celebration of the divine marriage, the community is divided—Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and his men celebrate their victory over the Bull of Heaven, while Ishtar and her followers mourn over the dead beast. The emotional and religious contrast between celebrations and mourning further highlights the division in the community.

The consequences of the refusal of Ishtar's proposal will also effect Gilgamesh personally, with Ishtar cursing him from the walls of Uruk:

Woe to Gilgameš, who vilified me, (who) killed the Bull of Heaven!

Gilgamesh's unique fulfilment of the religious obligations of the role of king is a crucial aspect of his identity, and integral to his character arc. Gilgamesh's tyranny, his killing of Humbaba, and rejection of Ishtar all illustrate a reckless attitude from the king towards the religious obligations that are central to the royal role. Through the lens of the king's journey, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* thematically foregrounds the cosmic and earthly imperative for harmonious relations between the Mesopotamian rule and the pantheon.

Gilgamesh the tyrant

In Tablet I, Gilgamesh is described as two-thirds deity and one third human. This expression occurs amongst several verses quantifying the young king's exceptionality, through the means of a series of measurements. Gilgamesh's feet and legs (and possibly more intimate body parts) are described in outsized proportions, and his stride is noted for its exceptional length. This section of the *Epic's* prologue emphasises the distinctiveness and excellence of Gilgamesh's physical form, a stress which continues throughout the narrative. This feature of the text is significant for understanding the theme of kingship.

The powerful attractiveness of Gilgamesh's form has a resonance which extends beyond the superficial; bodily beauty and vitality were integral components of royal imagery (Pongratz-Leisten, 2015: 219–221). Gilgamesh's body is filled with *kuzbu*, which meant he possessed an attractive charisma, or sexual allure. *Kuzbu* could be found in male or female bodies, and while *kuzbu* could be present when clothed, its power was more fully revealed through undressing (Bahrani, 2001: 55). As with other kings, as well as gods and heroes, the presence of *kuzbu* in a masculine figure had connotations of virility (Bahrani, 2001: 55).

Gilgamesh's appearance is entwined with his identity in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and his development as the ruler of Uruk is signalled through his changing looks. It is not only Gilgamesh that is presented in the form of a series of sizes in the opening of the *Epic*: the city of Uruk, over which Gilgamesh rules, is also quantified through measures. The description of Uruk and its ruler through measurement has the dual function of foregrounding their distinctiveness, and highlighting the interconnectedness of king and city.

Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk, and the city plays a pivotal role in the Standard Babylonian Version of the narrative. It was noted in the Introduction that the historical city of Uruk is the first known Mesopotamian urban centre, with urbanisation thought to have occurred there historically in the mid-fourth millennium BCE.

The southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk held a special relationship with kingship; the city provided the foundation for numerous early ruling dynasties, and played an important role in Mesopotamian religion and politics for over two millennia. As well as this, Uruk held a special role in the technological and cultural advancements in the development and spread of urbanised living of Southern Mesopotamia (considered in detail in Van de Mieroop, 1997). From the mid-fourth millennium, “Uruk culture” spread across a vast geographical area, with writing, the production of cylinder seals, mass-produced pottery, and decorated monumental architecture considered as the hallmarks of that culture (Van de Mieroop, 1997: 38). Perhaps unsurprisingly, yet importantly for the focus on Gilgamesh’s identity in this book, Uruk is not equally important in all tellings of the Gilgamesh story. In the Hittite version of *Gilgamesh*, for example, Uruk is deemphasised (Foster, 2001: 156).

The fate of the city and its young ruler in *Gilgamesh* exhibit some elements of symbiosis. Uruk is presented as a powerful centre of religious and political power, with a thriving population and numerous temples. The effective rule of Gilgamesh would allow the city to flourish, while ineffective leadership creates disruption and decay.

Similarly, the role of the king of Uruk gives Gilgamesh an opportunity to achieve the lasting fame and legacy which he seeks. It is often noted in scholarship that the walls of Uruk, described in the prologue of Tablet I, can be counted alongside the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself as an icon preserving the memory of the greatness of Uruk and Gilgamesh. The walls are said to have been built by Gilgamesh:

(Gilgamesh) built the wall of Uruk-the-sheepfold,
Of holy Eanna, the pure storehouse,
See its wall which is like a strand of wool,
View its parapet which nobody can replicate!

(SBV I: 11–14)

Wall-building as an activity for political leaders has received some bad

press in recent times, but Gilgamesh's construction of the walls of Uruk is presented in positive terms. This positivity can be seen in the further description of the wall from the same passage, where it is praised for its "kiln-fired brick" and strong foundations (SBV I: 18–21).

Indeed, the identification of the historical king as a builder of walls, architect, and caretaker of cultic activities was considered an expression of the concept of "holiness," (Pongratz-Leisten, 2009: 426–427), and thereby related to the special religiosity of the royal role. The description of the wall as "like a strand of wool" suggests a viewing point of a long distance away, or possibly an aerial view. The potential of viewing the construction from the sky may be alluding the connection of Uruk to Mesopotamian deities, some of whom are noted as having their homes within the city.

The city of Uruk is framed by its walls, and these walls also "frame" the introduction and conclusion of the main narrative of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Weeks, 2007; George, 2003). The walls of Uruk provide a locus for the hero's return to the city in Tablet XI. This narrative event has had numerous interpretations, and is considered in more detail in [Chapter 5](#). Along with the walls themselves, the mode of the walls' construction, the use of the hero's narrative as a foundation deposit, and the city that lies within the boundaries of the walls are also significant (Weeks, 2007: 85).

It is worth noting the varied function of Uruk in the narrative in terms of Gilgamesh's journey. Uruk plays a legitimising role, as a powerful and well-known urban centre. Despite its importance in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the location of Gilgamesh's home is not presented without variation in other versions. As Haubold has observed, the *Letter of Gilgamesh* presents Gilgamesh as the king of Ur, and beloved of Marduk (2015). The divine love of Marduk provides a connection to Babylon, a city of which Marduk was patron deity (Haubold, 2015).

Shamhat gives Enkidu a depiction of life in Uruk involving intriguing polarity in Tablet I. In her description, Shamhat presents the city in glowing terms, telling Enkidu that every day is a party in Uruk (SBV I: 228). She tells Enkidu that the city is full of finely dressed young men, *harimtu* (a type of courtesan) of surpassing loveliness, and percussive music (SBV I: 226–232). At the same time, Shamhat warns that Uruk is a city with an oppressive ruler: Gilgamesh.

In this section, the words of Shamhat echo those of the narrator

from the incipit. The audience has already been introduced to Gilgamesh, and in this section, Shamhat introduces him once more to Enkidu. The reintroduction of Gilgamesh gives special weight to Shamhat's advice to Enkidu, as the audience has already been primed with an image of Uruk's ruler that well fits her description.

Unspecified tyranny?

At the beginning of Tablet I, Gilgamesh's tyrannical leadership style is noted by the narrator, the people of Uruk, an unknown deity (probably Ea; see George, 2003: 450), and Shamhat. With this crowd of witnesses within the text, the tyranny of Gilgamesh seems assured, and yet a precise account of the nature of Gilgamesh's oppression of his subjects in Uruk has proved elusive.

In a well-known article from 1930, Jacobsen suggests that the oppression of the populace is best understood through its "remedy" in the creation of Enkidu. For Jacobsen, the oppression was viewed as sexual. The oppression is also thought by many scholars to involve the rite of *prima noctis*, where a ruler claimed sexual access to a bride prior to her marriage. In more recent times, the tyranny of Gilgamesh has become generally viewed as involving some kind of ball game which exhausts all of the players, who do not share his heroic stamina (in his analysis of the presence of allusions to sexual oppression in the ball game, Cooper's 2002 chapter neatly unites these two interpretations). Although there is good support for the suggested tyrannies against particular groups, such as sons, daughters or brides, it is worth further noting the problem of Gilgamesh's oppression as it relates to the entire community of Uruk.

Division and unity

The fullest account of Gilgamesh's bad behaviour is given in the section of Tablet I immediately following the introductory prologue. In this section, the narrator presents an oppressive view of Gilgamesh's leadership style:

He has not any equal, his weapons being at the ready,
His companions are kept on their feet by the ball.
The young men of Gilgamesh are wrongfully vexed,
Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father.
Day and night he behaves with fierce arrogance,
King Gilgamesh, who guides the numerous people,
He who is the shepherd in Uruk-the-sheepfold!

There is something oddly “democratic” about Gilgamesh’s tyranny. Every daughter, son, father, mother, warrior, bride, and bride-groom in Uruk is said to be affected by the king’s “fierce arrogance” (SBV I: 69). Rather than creating unity and harmony in the city of Uruk, Gilgamesh’s kingship is notable for its divisiveness, with all the various social groups unable to be in contact with one another. The oppression of various social groups seems at odds with the traditional role of the Mesopotamian king in protecting the socially vulnerable, such as widows and orphans (Keetman, 2007: 5).

The type of tyranny described in Tablet I is an anathema to the institution of kingship, which traditionally emphasised the promotion of strong bonds with the divine. These bonds could be developed through positive community connections, which were viewed as bringing joy to Mesopotamian deities. Interestingly, the division within the community results in the whole community’s complaints being brought to the gods and goddesses of the city. That is to say, to ensure the wellbeing of the community, the populace circumnavigate their mediator-king and go straight to the top.

If, as Jacobsen suggests, the nature of Gilgamesh’s tyranny can be best understood by considering the creation of Enkidu as a remedy, how does this illuminate the observation of the divisiveness of Gilgamesh’s leadership? In creating Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s “equal,” Gilgamesh acquires a companion—a friend who does not leave his side for a moment until they are parted by death. Through loving and losing Enkidu, Gilgamesh learns first-hand of the devastating impact of separation from one’s loved ones.

If an alternative view is taken of Enkidu as a kind of distraction, one who is capable of absorbing Gilgamesh’s energies due to his own unusual genesis, then the deities’ plan would appear to have been a failure. Instead of reigning in Gilgamesh’s excessive behaviour, Enkidu himself becomes more belligerent and oppressive towards wild creatures. This, however, is not the view of the deities’ plan supported here—although it should be noted that divine plans are not presented as infallible in *Gilgamesh*. Instead, Enkidu’s unusual genesis and superphysical stamina makes him a good match for Gilgamesh, but not as a distraction—instead, Enkidu is perfectly matched to be the object of Gilgamesh’s love, and in this way, to teach him the value of closeness and community.

Regardless of the nature of Gilgamesh's tyranny, it is clearly at odds with his royal role. The Mesopotamian king was duty-bound to distribute divine justice, and so any type of tyranny reflects a serious breach of the political and religious requirements of leadership in Uruk.

Mediation and royalty in Tablet XI

The proactive response of the people of Uruk in taking their complaints directly to the deities shows creditable initiative, but also a break-down in social and divine order. The king's duty to function as a mediator between the divine and human worlds was at the heart of his role, and his circumnavigation by the people reflects the gravity of Gilgamesh's disordered leadership. The importance of successful mediation with the divine is demonstrated in the Flood narrative, found in Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The Babylonian Flood story *Atrahasis* contains both creative and destructive relations between humans and deities. The *Atrahasis* narrative (meaning "surpassingly wise") takes its name from the human Flood survivor, and is famous for its correspondence with the biblical Flood account from the Book of Genesis. The Flood narrative is available in several versions, but it is the version from *Gilgamesh* which first drew the attention of the scholarly community. The critical nature of the divine-human bond is a prominent feature of the *Atrahasis* narrative, which is recounted by Utanapishtim in Tablet XI of the *Epic*.

In the version of the story seen in the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* (recounted in more detail in [Chapter 7](#)), the Mesopotamian deities, led by Enlil, have decided to destroy humanity. The mechanism of destruction is a great deluge. The motivation for this plan is not clearly elucidated in *Gilgamesh*, but other versions of the story provide more detail: the spread of humanity creates a great deal of noise, which causes a disturbance in the sleeping habits of Enlil. Although *Gilgamesh* does not include this motivation behind the Flood, the story retains the antagonism between Ea and Enlil seen in other versions (Pettinato, 2005: 599), as well as presenting Enlil's choice to destroy humanity in an unfavourable light. The condemnation of Enlil's role in causing the Flood is placed in the narrative in a form of a rebuke from Ea:

Ea opened his mouth to speak,

Saying to the hero Enlil:

‘You, the sage of the gods, the hero,

How could you lack counsel and cause the deluge?

(SBV XI: 181–184)

Through the intermediation of Ea, the god of wisdom, Utanapishtim and his wife escape the Flood and attain immortality; Utanapishtim recounts his immortality being bestowed upon him by Enlil. The Flood survivors are then sent far away from civilisation to live “at the mouth of rivers,” which presumably is where Gilgamesh finds them.

Of course, the survival of Utanapishtim and his wife, juxtaposed against the destruction of the rest of humanity, creates certain problems of logic for Gilgamesh’s existence and the proliferation of the human characters in the *Epic*. Should all the human characters be considered to be descendants of Utanapishtim, his wife and the craftspeople? If so, why was the story of their immortality not conferred to their offspring? While finding answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this chapter, Utanapishtim’s story demonstrates the fragility of human life, and the crucial importance of relations with the divine in Mesopotamian religion. The use of the Flood narrative at the climax of Gilgamesh’s long journey emphasises its importance to the development of the hero’s wisdom and character.

At the very beginning of the Standard Babylonian Version, Gilgamesh is introduced to the audience in a long section of praise. Gilgamesh’s wisdom is accentuated, with emphasis on its connection to his visit with Utanapishtim:

(Gilgamesh) [learnt] the totality of wisdom about everything.

He saw the secret and uncovered the hidden,

He brought back a message from the antediluvian age.

(SBV I: 6–8)

As well as stressing the causal link between Gilgamesh’s wisdom and his communication with Utanapishtim, the prologue further underlines the significance of Utanapishtim’s role in the reestablishment of positive relations between humans and the divine after the Flood. The prologue recounts the great lengths undertaken by Gilgamesh to find the Flood survivor, before noting Utanapishtim’s religious role, and then the composer moves to praise Gilgamesh’s uniqueness and his kingly status:

Gilgameš so tall, perfect and terrible,

Who opened passes in the mountains ...
Who scoured the world-regions ever searching for life,
And reached by his strength Ūta-napišti the Far-Away;
who restored the cult-centres that the Deluge destroyed,
and established the proper rites for the human race!
Who is there that can be compared with him in kingly status,
And can say like Gilgameš, ‘It is I am the king?’

(SBV I: 37–46)

These ten lines form a unit clearly connecting Gilgamesh’s long journey to find Utanapishtim with the outcome of this adventure: the hero’s development of wisdom and his acceptance of his kingly role, which shapes the meaning of the narrative. This connection is considered further later in this chapter.

The Akkadian name Utanapishtim means “I found my life” (George, 2015), although this character is also known by the names Atrahasis and Ziusudra. In several ways, Utanapishtim is uniquely well placed to instruct Gilgamesh. As the only humans to have achieved lasting immortality, Utanapishtim and his wife can provide special instruction on the limitations of the human condition—and whether these limitations can be overcome. The epithet of Utanapishtim “the Far-Away” seems likely to reference the immortal quality of his nature; as considered in [Chapter 3](#), he inhabits a distant land, closer to the supernatural than the natural world.

Utanapishtim: the “other” king of *Gilgamesh*

Despite his late arrival to the action, Utanapishtim is one of the most significant characters of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Like Ninsun and Enkidu, Utanapishtim influences and supports Gilgamesh, and alters the king’s perception of the world. Utanapishtim provides Gilgamesh with a crucial model of leadership through his advice and his account of the Flood.

Utanapishtim is best known today through the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and is often paralleled with the biblical Flood survivor, Noah (see [Chapter 7](#)). The royalty or otherwise of Utanapishtim in broader Mesopotamian traditions is a complicated issue. Once considered as a king in all traditions, the influential analysis of Finkelstein led to a more nuanced understanding of the Flood survivor, and the awareness that he may not have been considered a king in all his literary incarnations (1963). In a detailed exploration of the issue, Davila has

shown that the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* reflects the tradition of the royal Flood survivor (1995: 206). While his connections to royalty might be tenuous in some sources, to Mesopotamian audiences, Utanapishtim was part of a wider literary tradition involving the genre of wisdom, with connections to kingship.

Utanapishtim beyond the *Epic*

An essential aspect of the character of Utanapishtim is his ability to dispense knowledge to Gilgamesh. This ability holds connections to his broader literary role in Mesopotamian wisdom traditions. The literary “genre” of wisdom literature is considered in [Chapter 5](#), along with considerations surrounding its definition. The earliest known texts of the genre broadly known as “wisdom literature” come from Sumer.

Collections of Sumerian proverbs include the Sumerian wisdom composition, *The Instructions of Shuruppag* (ETCSL 5.6.1). This composition dates from the early third millennium BCE. The *Instructions of Shuruppag* is written in the style of a father advising a son on various issues, including matters of the heart. The father’s name, Shuruppag, is the same as the name of his city, which is one of five antediluvian cities in Mesopotamian tradition—the other cities being Eridu, Bad-Tibara, Larak, and Sipar (Beaulieu, 2007: 4).

The *Instructions* opens with a clear depiction of the source of the wisdom that is the focus of the composition:

In those days, in those far remote days, in those nights, in those faraway nights, in those years, in those far remote years, at that time the wise one who knew how to speak in elaborate words lived in the Land; Šuruppag, the wise one, who knew how to speak with elaborate words lived in the Land. Šuruppag gave instructions to his son; Šuruppag, the son of Ubara-Tutu gave instructions to his son Zi-ud-sura.

(The Instructions of Shuruppag, ETCSL 5.6.1)

Ziusudra, as noted earlier, is another name for Utanapishtim, and in Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Flood survivor informs Gilgamesh (and perhaps, reminds the audience) of his connection to this ancient city:

(Ea speaks to Utanapishtim): “Oh man of Šuruppag, son of Ubār-

Tutu,
Demolish the house, build a boat!"

(SBV XI: 23–24)

The Sumerian composition *The Instructions of Shuruppag* encompasses a broad array of subjects, but the text is clear about the motivations of the character of Shuruppag: he is to give his son the benefit of his wisdom and experience:

My son, let me give you instructions: you should pay attention! Zidud-sura, let me speak a word to you: you should pay attention! Do not neglect my instructions! Do not transgress the words I speak! The instructions of an old man are precious; you should comply with them!

(The Instructions of Shuruppag, ETCSL 5.6.1)

After this grand and cohortative introduction, the instructions themselves are listed. The reader may be surprised by the bucolic nature of the first piece of knowledge to be bestowed upon Utanapishtim (although perhaps the audience is aware that the handling of livestock will prove important in the Flood survivor's future ...):

You should not buy a donkey which brays; it will split (?) your midriff (?).

(The Instructions of Shuruppag, ETCSL 5.6.1)

As well as being distinctively connected to wisdom traditions, Utanapishtim is also closely linked to the character of Gilgamesh. The similarities between Utanapishtim and Gilgamesh allow for a comparison by the audience of the two characters.

Utanapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The character of Utanapishtim would have been well known to ancient Babylonian audiences as the last of the legendary antediluvian kings (George, 2003: 510). In this kingly guise, the Flood survivor character is then particularly well placed to guide Gilgamesh in his development to become Uruk's great and wise king.

Utanapishtim's telling of the Flood story in Tablet XI involves several aspects which depict him inhabiting the role of a Mesopotamian king. Utanapishtim is introduced into the Flood

narrative as the man of Shuruppag, and son of Ubar-Tutu (SBV XI: 23). Ubar-Tutu is known from the Sumerian king list as a legendary king of Shuruppag, a city in central southern Mesopotamia, thought to be modern day Tell Fara (Dalley, 1989: 1). Utanapishtim, as Ubar-Tutu's heir, lives in the palace at Shuruppag (SBV XI: 95–96).

Utanapishtim is chosen by Ea to be saved from the coming Flood. The close, protective relationship between Ea and Utanapishtim, seen in the Flood story, singles out the Flood survivor from the rest of humanity, and ensures his survival. This special relationship reflects the privileged nature of the connection between the king and the Mesopotamian deities. Close divine connections can be seen in a further reference to Shamash setting Utanapishtim a deadline for his Flood preparations:

Šamaš had set me a deadline—
‘In the morning he will rain down bread-cakes,
In the evening, a torrent of wheat.
Go into the boat and seal your hatch!’

(SBV XI: 87–89)

Although the reference to Shamash's “deadline” may reflect the deity's role in bringing forth the dawn (compare the coming of Shamash in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*), it is more plausible that the narrative is depicting Shamash as having a role in advising and protecting Utanapishtim. Mesopotamian kings were closely associated with the solar deity Shamash (Sumerian Utu), and this connection was elucidated through a variety of metaphors relating to shepherding and just rulership (see Charpin, 2013, for a detailed analysis of the link between Mesopotamian monarchs and solar deities). Shamash's appearance just prior to the Deluge recalls the special bond of protection between the solar deity and the king.

Following the Flood, Utanapishtim describes to Gilgamesh his lamentations for the destruction and death that have left the world unrecognisable. After sending out birds to test if there is any area of land above water, his first action, once the waters begin receding, is to set up religious rituals:

I brought out an offering and sacrificed to the four corners of the
earth ...
Seven flasks and seven I set in position,
Below them I heaped up (sweet) reed, cedar and myrtle.

This section of the myth is referenced earlier in Tablet I, where Utanapishtim is credited with restoring “the cult centres that the Deluge destroyed,” and establishing “the proper rites for the human race” (SBV I: 43–44). The description of the “rites” is not clearly elucidated, but it is possible that the reference to the “proper rites” for the human race may invoke the funerary rites which will become associated with Gilgamesh in broader traditions. In any case, the “rites” seem essential for the continued beneficial contact between the human and divine worlds, and therefore are naturally well suited to be observed by a king.

Utanapishtim’s weeping for the destruction of humanity, and his restoration of sacrifices, shows his religious piety, and his leadership with re-establishing religious order on earth demonstrates his kingly role in the story. Utanapishtim’s sacrifice draws the Mesopotamian deities back down from the heavens where they had been hiding.

Advice to a young hero

As noted earlier, Utanapishtim has a distinctive connection to Mesopotamian wisdom traditions. This aspect of his characterisation, combined with the kingly qualities of his presentation, uniquely qualify the Flood survivor to advise Uruk’s headstrong young king.

When Gilgamesh and Utanapishtim finally meet in Tablet X, it is the climax of Gilgamesh’s long journey in search of immortality. The narrative is laden with suspense: Gilgamesh, as has been demonstrated earlier in the *Epic*, has a tendency towards heedless actions, and for using excessive force to get his own way. Utanapishtim, as one of a tiny minority who have gained the secret to immortality, would appear to be in possession of something of value to the *Epic*’s protagonist. Yet, the suspense in the narrative is quickly diffused when the two royal figures finally meet, through the instant sympathy between them. Before the Flood survivor can speak a word, Utanapishtim’s presence exerts a powerful and pacifying influence over Gilgamesh.

Utanapishtim’s effect on Gilgamesh is sufficiently powerful to divert the young king from his original plan to conquer the Flood survivor through physical force. Instead, Gilgamesh asks Utanapishtim how he reached his esteemed and unique position among humanity. Gilgamesh’s awareness of Utanapishtim’s influence over him is made

explicit at the beginning of Tablet XI, where Gilgamesh notes this in a speech:

Gilgameš spoke to him, to Ūta-napišti the Far-Away,
‘As I look at you, Ūta-napišti,
Your form is not different, you are just like me ...
I was fully intent on doing battle with you,
[but] in your presence my hand is stayed.

(SBV XI: 1–7)

The exact cause of Utanapishtim’s pacifying effect on Gilgamesh is left unelucidated, with the issue foregrounded by the hero’s observation that Utanapishtim is “not different at all.” The suggestion that there is nothing “different” about Utanapishtim and he is “just like” Gilgamesh should perhaps be taken as meaning there is nothing outwardly visible about Utanapishtim which would reveal his status as immortal, but also gives emphasis to the similarities between the two figures.

Gilgamesh here offers himself as a point of comparison for Utanapishtim. This is an interesting choice, as the physical difference of Gilgamesh, compared with other humans, has previously been observed in the text at several points. Gilgamesh’s physicality is noted for its exceptionality in the introductory section of Tablet I, where his physique is said to surpass all others—even the figures of other kings!

Gilgamesh’s appearance is distinctive at this point in the narrative in a less positive sense, due to his dishevelled and weathered appearance. The unkempt quality of Gilgamesh’s appearance is immediately remarked upon by Utanapishtim when the pair finally meet.

In commenting on the similarity of Utanapishtim’s appearance to his own, Gilgamesh may be comparing the Flood survivor against his previous opponents. Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, and the Stone Ones are all powerful creatures with supernatural qualities, and their exceptional qualities are reflected in their appearance. Gilgamesh himself is unusual in his appearance, reflecting his heroic nature. From this perspective, it is plausible to view Gilgamesh’s comments on Utanapishtim as giving the audience an opportunity to compare the pair of kings, and to signal that the two characters should be considered together.

Gilgamesh’s sympathetic attitude towards Utanapishtim is reciprocated in the kindly reception he receives from the Flood

survivor. Utanapishtim at once enquires about Gilgamesh's worn appearance, and his bedraggled attire. He gives the young protagonist a (fragmentary) speech about the importance of taking better care of himself. Utanapishtim reminds Gilgamesh of the value of good advice, before providing clear direction on issues which have preoccupied Gilgamesh over the course of the preceding nine tablets, such as the nature of mortality. The Flood survivor also questions Gilgamesh's role in his own misfortunes, and suggests he has been misdirected in his efforts.

In his speech from Tablet X, Utanapishtim shares his wisdom with Gilgamesh. The speech moves from commenting on Gilgamesh's current deeds, including his actions in "chasing sorrow," to more general observations on the nature of mortality and humanity.

Audiences familiar with Utanapishtim's connection to wisdom literature, including *The Instructions of Shuruppak*, would be primed to understand this scene as one that depicts the transition of wisdom. The exchange between Utanapishtim and Gilgamesh reflects the wisdom tradition of the passing on of wisdom from one generation to the next, from king to king, and from father to son. Although Utanapishtim is not identified in the text as Gilgamesh's father, in this scene, and in his role in the *Epic*, he clearly inhabits a paternal role.

Utanapishtim's assessment of the futility of Gilgamesh's recent deeds is somewhat at odds with the account the hero gives of his own actions. Interestingly, the meeting with Utanapishtim is the last time Gilgamesh will relate the story of his suffering and wandering following Enkidu's death.

While Gilgamesh describes his deeds with a kind of heroic bravado, Utanapishtim questions the outcome of the young king's actions. This is particularly resonant advice for Gilgamesh, whose frequently rash behaviour means he perpetually overlooks or misjudges the consequences of his own actions. The ability of the wise to foresee the future results of current actions is considered in [Chapter 5](#), but it is worth noting that this ability is also important for religious observances such as divination and sacrifice.

Utanapishtim points out the results of Gilgamesh's adventures, saying:

[You,] you kept toiling sleepless (and) what did you get?
You are exhausting [yourself with] ceaseless toil!
You are filling your sinews with pain,
Bringing nearer the end of your life.

Utanapishtim notes the counter-productive nature of Gilgamesh's actions, observing that the inevitability of death and its unpredictability are the preserve of the gods. This speech by Utanapishtim invites comparisons with the common wisdom tradition of a father giving advice to a son. The literary device of presenting advice through a discourse is a common feature of the literature known as "Mirrors for Princes," a common genre in Middle Eastern literary texts that vary greatly in content, but frequently feature a young royal being advised by an elder colleague on how to conduct their affairs. *The Instructions of Shuruppak*, where Utanapishtim/Ziusudra is the recipient, rather than the giver of advice, has been noted as an example of this genre by Black (1998: 284).

In *Gilgamesh*, Utanapishtim shifts from receiving advice to bestowing it upon the younger royal. Viewed in this way, the dialogue with Utanapishtim is a crucial moment in Gilgamesh's characterisation as king. By being part of the dialogue with Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh is shown to be part of a tradition of royal instruction reaching back to antediluvian times. The absence of Gilgamesh's father earlier in the narrative raises the stakes for Gilgamesh's meeting with Utanapishtim, and means he is finally inducted into his royal role. For this reason, the speech from Utanapishtim is a turning point in the narrative.

While the first section of Utanapishtim's speech to Gilgamesh involves the dispensation of advice around personal and esoteric matters, the second part of the speech in Tablet XI famously involves the Flood survivor giving an account of the destruction of humankind in the Deluge.

The relationship of humanity and the divine is at the forefront of this passage. It has been noted earlier that Utanapishtim's special relationship with Ea affords him protection from the cataclysmic events of the Flood. Following the Deluge, Utanapishtim performs the critical role of re-establishing communications between humans and deities, through religious rituals.

(Utanapishtim) brought out an offering and sacrificed to the four
 corners of the earth,
 I strewed incense on the peak of the mountain.
 Seven and seven flasks I set in position,
 Below them I heaped up (sweet) reed, cedar and myrtle.
 The gods smelled the savour ...

The gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.

(SBV XI: 157–163)

Through his careful religious observance, Utanapishtim inspires one of the deities, Belit-ili, to seemingly swear an oath never to forget the disastrous consequences of the Flood. After describing this scene to Gilgamesh, Utanapishtim explains he and his wife were then granted immortality by Enlil, and sent to live “far away.” At the end of his speech, Utanapishtim asks Gilgamesh:

But now, who will bring the gods to assembly for you,
So you can find the life you search for?

(SBV XI: 207–208)

It is difficult to clearly assess the meaning of Utanapishtim’s question. Following this, Utanapishtim then makes the challenge that Gilgamesh try to stay awake for seven days and six nights (which the hero epically fails). One might equally wonder in line with this question—who caused the gods to assemble for Utanapishtim and his wife? Several interpretations of Utanapishtim’s account are possible. While it was the Flood survivor himself who drew the deities near through sacrifice, Belit-Ili has the role of exhorting the deities (except notably Enlil) to come to the incense. However, it is Enlil, uninvited and excluded for his “lack of counsel” and destruction, who grants the Flood-surviving pair “life.”

What is clear is that the circumstances of the Flood cannot be repeated. Enlil’s change of heart and granting of immortality to Utanapishtim and his wife could be viewed as an effort to repair the rift with his fellow deities, or possibly an attempt to limit the amount of divine wisdom in the hands of mortals—in his awareness of the coming Flood, Utanapishtim was privy to a divine secret. In either case, immortality is set far beyond the reach of mortals, and in Utanapishtim’s example, the immortality of two individuals indirectly resulted from the near-extinction of humanity.

The results of Utanapishtim’s speech to Gilgamesh are significant. The young king finally receives guidance which allows him to accept his role as king, and the story of Utanapishtim’s costly road to immortality leads to Gilgamesh finally accepting his mortality, and his decision to return to his city of Uruk.

Dressed for success

Physical appearances are important aspects of characterisations in *Gilgamesh*, and clothing can be considered as an element of identity. Clothing contributes to characterisation in diverse ways. In Tablet II, Enkidu's receipt of clothing from Shamhat marks his transition towards civilisation, from his unclothed, uncivilised state in Tablet I. Humbaba's "seven cloaks" (also known as the Auras of Terror) are connected to his fearsome power, and as such, his clothing is a key element in his battle against Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Ninsun adorns herself in her finest clothing to perform religious rites to gain Shamash's assistance in protecting Gilgamesh, and it is in his finest clothing that Gilgamesh draws the eye of the goddess of love in Tablet VI. Most significantly for the theme of kingship in this chapter, the descent of Gilgamesh into a more animalistic and less human state, following the death of Enkidu, is signposted in the narrative by an accompanying deterioration in the warrior's appearance.

In Tablet IX, Gilgamesh becomes distressed due to his companion's death and his own mortality. This is not the first time that Gilgamesh's grief is reflected in his style of dress. In Tablet VIII, Gilgamesh compares his late companion to a study weapon, but also to fine clothing, calling Enkidu "my festive garment, the girdle of my delight." The young king is then described tearing off his fine clothing, and pulling out his hair in heartache:

He was pulling out his curly [tresses] and letting them fall in a
heap,
Tearing off his finery and casting it away [... like] something
taboo.

(SBV VIII: 63–64)

In the same scene, Gilgamesh predicts a further transformation of his appearance, vowing that after the community has mourned Enkidu, he will wear the "matted hair of mourning," clothe himself in the skin of a lion and go roaming in the wilderness.

Following Enkidu's burial, as he had vowed, Gilgamesh dresses himself in the skin of a lion and becomes weathered and bedraggled. With his long hair and wild looks, Gilgamesh mirrors Enkidu in his pre-civilised state. It is Siduri who first notes Gilgamesh's worn appearance:

[Why are your] cheeks [hollow], your face sunken ...
Your face is burnt [by frost and sunshin]e,

[And] you roam the wild [got up like a lion]?

(SBV X: 40–45)

This reaction is echoed by Ur-Shanabi, and then finally Utanapishtim. Each time his appearance is noted by someone he meets, Gilgamesh gives a detailed and repetitious account of the events which have led to his current condition, as well as a spoken self-portrait echoing the concerns of his beholder. The cause for his unseemly presentation is explained by Gilgamesh as due to a combination of his grief over Enkidu's death, his fear of death and his long journey.

After donning the lion skin, Gilgamesh encounters the Scorpion People, who recognise through Gilgamesh's appearance that he is two-thirds divine. Although there appears to be a brief mention of Gilgamesh's worn features (SBV IX: 125–128), it is in the following tablet, Tablet X, that a repeating pattern of recognition, identification, and motivation, all centred around Gilgamesh's physical condition is established.

Each time Gilgamesh meets a new figure in Tablet X, the new character enquires after his appearance, and is then given a detailed reply by Gilgamesh. The pattern appears three times, finishing with Gilgamesh's encounter with Utanapishtim. By the time Gilgamesh meets Utanapishtim, it has been firmly established in the narrative that the young king's appearance reflects his identity and character. This foregrounds the changes that will take place during the meeting with Utanapishtim in Gilgamesh's character—and his costume.

The encounter with Utanapishtim in Tablets X and XI is framed by accounts of Gilgamesh's appearance, with this narrative structure emphasising the transformative power of the meeting. While Gilgamesh arrives in Utanapishtim's presence looking more animal than man, he departs dressed in royal attire, on the orders of the Flood survivor:

The man that you led here,
Whose body is tousled with matted hair,
The beauty of whose flesh the hides have ruined,
Take him, Ur-šanabi, get him to the washtub,
Let him wash his matted hair as clean as can be!
Let him cast off his hides and the sea carry (them away)!
Soak his body so fair!
Let the kerchief of his head be renewed!

Let him be clad in a royal robe, the attire befitting his dignity!

(SBV XI: 250–258)

Gilgamesh's change in appearance from his meeting with Utanapishtim says everything about the crucial change the visit has brought about in the protagonist, and also, about the nature of this change. Gilgamesh leaves Utanapishtim in attire fit for a king, and in turn he will now be better "suited" for the role of king of Uruk. Through the repeated descriptions of Gilgamesh's appearance and clothing, the nature of Utanapishtim's influence is revealed.

Kingship in *Gilgamesh and Aga*

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* explores the limits of Gilgamesh's humanity, but also tests the boundaries of royal privilege. The king, along with the Mesopotamian deities, was inextricably connected to the maintenance of the divine order of the cosmos, the king's identification with Shamash linked him especially closely with universal balance and the preservation of justice. The recognition of Gilgamesh's power as king is reflected in several versions of his adventures; his capacity for deciding to make war, and then to establish peace, forms the basis of the plot of the Sumerian myth, *Gilgamesh and Aga*.

The composition of *Gilgamesh and Aga* is unusual in terms of its subject matter. As Cooper has shown, early epic poetry involving the kings of Uruk is usually focused on efforts to use military or diplomatic means to obtain natural resources from Aratta (as seen in the Enmerkar and Lugalbanda traditions), or with Gilgamesh's struggle with his own mortality (1981: 224). In contrast, *Gilgamesh and Aga* provides "the only extensive literary account of early intra-Babylonian conflict" (Cooper, 1981: 224). While noting its uniqueness, the story of *Gilgamesh and Aga* provides a Sumerian narrative that can be compared against other narratives of early kings.

In the myth, the king of Kish, Aga, sends envoys to Uruk. Aga, "son of En-me-barage-si" (ETCSL 1.8.1.1) is thought to be a character with historical origins. The Mesopotamian ruler, Enmebaragesi of Kish, is the earliest Babylonian king whose rule is documented by a surviving contemporary inscription (Cooper, 1981: 228). Gilgamesh discusses the issue of Aga's hostility with the city elders, but eventually goes against their advice. When the elders do not support Gilgamesh's plans for battle, he turns instead to the city's young men for support, and then makes war on Aga and his armies as they attack Uruk.

Gilgamesh employs his “great fearsomeness” to “overwhelm” the rival king of Kish (*Gilgamesh and Aga*, ETCSL 1.8.1.1), as well as using a clever strategy to confound his enemies (Heimpel, 1981). Gilgamesh’s kingship is critical to the success of his plan; his powerful inhabitation of the role of monarch is described at length in the very brief composition, and emphasised through the use of a contrasting or parallel figure.

As part of Gilgamesh’s plan, his royal guard, Birhar-tura is sent out of the city gates to distract Aga. The guard describes Gilgamesh’s majesty to the rival king, through comparison with a city official:

... (Birhar-tura) came into the presence of Aga and then spoke to Aga. Before he had finished speaking, an officer of Unug (Uruk) climbed up on the rampart and leaned out over the rampart. Aga saw him and then spoke to Birhar-tura: ‘Slave, is that man your king?’

‘That man is not my king! Were that man my king, were that his angry brow, were those his bison eyes, were that his lapis lazuli beard, were those his elegant fingers, would he not cast down multitudes, would he not raise up multitudes, would multitudes not be smeared with dust, would not all the nations be overwhelmed, would not the land’s canal-mouths be filled with silt, would not the barges’ prows be broken, and would he not take Aga, the king of Kiš, captive in the midst of his army?’

(ETCSL 1.8.1.1)

The description of Gilgamesh provided by through this comparison emphasises the majesty and power of the king, particularly in terms of his imposing appearance (quite reasonably, considering it is a verbal portrait), and the king’s capacity for the destruction of people, lands and nature. The contrast offers the chance for the audience to “see” the legendary hero through the eyes of his loyal subject. Aga, too, is given the opportunity to see the king that Birhar-tura has described within the next few lines of the composition, when Gilgamesh himself appears on the city wall, and looks down at Aga and his army:

Gilgameš leaned out over the rampart. Looking up, Aga saw him: ‘Slave, is that man your king?’

‘That man is indeed my king.’ It was just as he had said: Gilgameš cast down multitudes, he raised up multitudes, multitudes were smeared with dust, all the nations were

overwhelmed, the land's canal-mouths were filled with silt, the barges' prows were broken, and he took Aga, the king of Kiš, captive in the midst of his army.

(ETCSL 1.8.1.1)

Through repetition and parallel, the exceptional power of Gilgamesh as a king is emphasised, and he is portrayed as superior to the rival monarch.

The detailed descriptions of Gilgamesh's terrible majesty in the composition perhaps make the ending of the myth unexpected. Rather than killing the captured king of Kish, Gilgamesh shows mercy to his adversary by freeing Aga, and allowing him to return home.

The solar deity, Utu (Semitic Shamash) is invoked by Gilgamesh numerous times in his speech where he proclaims his intention to show kindness to his adversary. In one version of the story, the act of clemency is preceded by Gilgamesh's description of his kingly role in Uruk:

'I (Gilgamesh) watch over Unug, the handiwork of the gods, its great rampart, a cloudbank resting on the earth, its majestic residence which An established. The city will repay the kindness shown to me. Before Utu, your former kindness is hereby repaid to you.' He set Aga free to go to Kiš.

(ETCSL 1.8.1.1)

This section of the myth places Gilgamesh's act of mercy towards Aga in the context of the hero's kingship of Uruk, and his close connection to Utu—important for both the deity's identification with the historical role of Mesopotamian kingship, and his competence in cosmic justice. Gilgamesh's kindness to Aga further recalls his initial impulse to show mercy to another adversary—the forest guardian, Humbaba, in the Babylonian Version of the *Epic*.

The picture of Gilgamesh's kingship seen in *Gilgamesh and Aga* contains several elements that characterise his kingship in other narratives, such as his exceptional capacity for destruction and making war, his striking appearance, leadership of Uruk's young men, his close ties to deities, heedless response to the elders' advice, and his desire to show mercy to his adversaries. Yet in this Sumerian narrative, Gilgamesh seems to wear the role of leader more comfortably than in the Babylonian epic. He works alongside deities—notably Inanna—for the benefit of the city and his people, and he

shows a commitment to justice and mercy.

In contrast to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in the story of his conflict with Aga, Gilgamesh is proved right in rejecting the counsel of the city's elders. He also shows cleverness in his approach to battle, where he appears to set a kind of trap for Aga, which involves using a volunteer from Uruk as bait. It is difficult to begin to account for the differences in the portrayal of Gilgamesh in the two narratives. Sumerian and Akkadian epics are sufficiently dissimilar to make challenging work of scholarly comparison, yet it seems unlikely that the difference should be ascribed to generic variety. Gilgamesh behaves less justly in another Sumerian composition, the myth of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, where he makes false oaths and tricks his opponent.

Although there is insufficient evidence to make a certain assessment of the causes of the differences in Gilgamesh's character in *Gilgamesh and Aga*, it is possible that the royal nature of the hero's adversary may be part of the equation. The story-telling motif of "home-town" king versus "foreign" king was a popular one in Sumerian narrative. Several myths involving plots that are centred on this device, with notable examples include *Enmerkar and Ensu-kheshdanna*, and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. It is possible that the story-telling device of king against king creates an emphasis on the hero's superior qualities as a ruler, when compared to a rival. This would be in comparison to other conflicts involving outsized, fantastical opponents, which might focus more on the hero's unusual strength and stamina.

Utanapishtim and Gilgamesh in Tablet XI

The piety and mercy shown by Gilgamesh in his kingly role from *Gilgamesh and Aga* are only occasionally in evidence in his depiction from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, yet these ethical elements of kingship are doubtlessly valued in the worldview of the composition. The importance of kingly piety is carefully illustrated through the story of Utanapishtim and the Flood, where Utanapishtim is singled out for his close connection to Ea.

The piety of Utanapishtim is of crucial significance to re-establishing the positive and reciprocal relationships between humans and deities after the Flood. The connection between humans and deities is doubtlessly hierarchical, yet interdependent. Humanity is presented as holding a significant role in supporting the divine sphere,

and positive human/divine relationships are essential for the well-being of both groups (Pryke, 2016a). Part of this reciprocity is demonstrated through ritual and sacrifice, which is seen in Tablet XI. The “need” of the deities (Benavides, 2017) for the offerings is shown in the narrative by their swift gathering around Utanapishtim’s offerings.

Gilgamesh’s visit with Utanapishtim shows him at the greatest distance from his origins in Uruk, but it is the point in the narrative where he learns how to be the king Uruk needs. In the introductory section of Tablet I, Gilgamesh is described and his many deeds are recounted by the narrator. The heroic actions of Gilgamesh described in Tablet I and elsewhere in the narrative are considered in [Chapter 2](#), but it is worth considering here the presentation in this section of Gilgamesh’s visit to Utanapishtim.

The passage from the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* I: 36–47 juxtaposes Gilgamesh’s visit with Utanapishtim with his reported speech: “*It is I am the king*” (SBV I: 46). This juxtaposition creates emphasis and unity with the description of Gilgamesh’s heroic deeds, his visit to the Flood survivor, and his role as king. The cohesiveness of the section is strengthened by a chain of participles used to describe Gilgamesh—this chain is well reflected in George’s translation by the repeated word “*who*,” for example: “*who opened passes in the mountains*” (George, 2003: 541). The repeated use of participles in this section creates a focus on the role of Gilgamesh’s actions in shaping his identity; Gilgamesh is shown to be a character who opens passes in the mountains, digs wells, crosses the ocean, and searches for life. This seems particularly well-suited language for describing heroic deeds.

The translation by George of lines I: 37–47 has been reproduced earlier in this chapter. George’s translation is the scholarly standard and doubtlessly well represents the original text. However, it is possible to give perhaps a more literal translation, which in my view might further illuminate the role of the visit with Utanapishtim in shaping Gilgamesh’s identity as king. The line transliterated by George as: “*ka-šid dan-nu-us-su a-na mUD-napišti(zi) ru-ú-qī*” may be translated: “*and reached by his strength Ūta-napišti the Far-Away*” (George, 2003: 541). An alternative translation would be: “*(Gilgamesh) who reached his power at Uta-napishti the Far-Away.*” If this translation is accepted, the significance of Utanapishtim’s role in shaping Gilgamesh kingly “power” is further emphasised, as the text may suggest that Gilgamesh reaches his full strength upon his meeting with the Flood Survivor.

Gilgamesh's identity as a king is central to his characterisation. The thematic emphasis in narratives involving Gilgamesh on relations between humans and deities places the hero in the liminal territory joining the mortal and immortal worlds. The role of the Mesopotamian king, in history and in other Mesopotamian epic narratives, is one of serious religious responsibility. The king linked the natural and supernatural worlds, and assisted the deities in their duties of administering justice and preserving cosmic and earthly balance.

When considered in light of the demands of the royal role, Gilgamesh's actions in the *Epic* may be viewed as contrary to expectation. Rather than assisting deities, he fights them, and instead of administering justice, he abuses his privileged position. The importance of kingship in maintaining the connection with the divine world—and indeed, in the preservation of life—is emphasised in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through the contrasting character of the legendary king, Utanapishtim. The Flood survivor's religious piety assists in the renewal of earthly order following the Deluge, and Utanapishtim is also pivotal in helping Gilgamesh to find the necessary wisdom to fulfil his kingly role. Gilgamesh's characterisation as a king who rules in a less than ideal manner in the *Epic* allows for the consideration of the limits and liabilities of leadership roles in Mesopotamian civilisation and culture. Gilgamesh's journey to become a worthier ruler gives depth to his characterisation, and significant cultural resonance to the *Epic*.



Gilgamesh

Warrior and hero

In [Chapter 1](#), Gilgamesh's identity as a king was shown to be central to his characterisation. With the royal role came serious responsibilities and connections to the political and religious worlds of ancient Uruk, yet these responsibilities were shown to be at times subverted by the young king's actions. Gilgamesh's identity as a warrior and hero played a similarly dominate role in the shaping of his image, and this chapter considers the hero's character in the context of his superlative deeds. In narrative literature and material culture, Gilgamesh is depicted fighting extraordinary battles against exceptional opponents.

Conflict involving the confrontation of difficult adversaries or problems is a common driving feature of narratives involving legendary heroes, and each hero's response to conflict helps to more clearly define their image as individuals. This area of differentiation also makes each hero uniquely memorable. Gilgamesh's (almost) insatiable appetite for conquest and violence shapes both his characterisation and his journey across several myths, and his avid desire for battle is especially evident in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh cannot resist a fight, and rushes heedlessly into battle with varying results—at times, his exploits are successful and celebrated, at other times, his actions result in disaster. Physical conflict provides the path from enmity to friendship with Enkidu, and the pair's desire for conquest leads them into battle against animals, monsters, and even deities.

Gilgamesh's greatest adversary is death. In many ways, it is the hero's own mortality that he battles most fiercely throughout his legendary journeys, in a variety of sources. Yet, despite his many successes against fierce animals, supernatural creatures, and foreign kings, the battle against death is one fight that Gilgamesh is not destined to win. In the Sumerian myth *The Death of Gilgamesh*, the

hero's great deeds are eulogised, with narrator commenting that Enlil made kingship to be Gilgamesh's destiny—but not eternal life. The inevitability of Gilgamesh's death is expressed in martial terms that support the epic nature of his fight for survival:

The unavoidable battle awaits you (Gilgamesh) now. The unequal struggle awaits you now. The skirmish from which there is no escape awaits you now. But you should not go to the underworld with heart knotted in anger.

(*The Death of Gilgamesh*, ETCSL 1.8.1.3)

Gilgamesh is a larger-than-life hero whose special qualities and quasi-divinity predestine him for greatness. The hero's many remarkable qualities, and his unique background, place him as best amongst mortals to achieve a lasting defeat over death. While Gilgamesh does not defeat death, he does achieve a degree of immortality through his divine origins and great deeds. Even against his greatest adversary, Gilgamesh's battle is presented with complexity and the outcome can be interpreted in various ways.

Heroes and warriors

In this chapter, Gilgamesh is considered through his identification as a warrior and a hero. Warfare, heroism, and conflict are presented in complex ways in *Gilgamesh*. Harris's depiction of Gilgamesh as “paradigmatic warrior hero of eons” is typical of how he has been understood (Harris, 2000: 49). In [Chapter 1](#), it was noted that the role of king encompassed an array of paradigms and symbolism.

While at times in the modern day the terms “warrior” and “hero” might be used interchangeably, for the purposes of this chapter, it is worth considering the relationship of both roles to Gilgamesh individually (while noting the possible anachronisms of this approach—the roles of warrior and hero show a good deal of overlap in Mesopotamia, including the language used to describe them). For the purposes of clarity, Gilgamesh's martial conflicts will generally be considered in terms of his identity as a warrior, whereas the king's deeds in exploring new areas and making discoveries are viewed as his “heroic” activities. Gilgamesh's role as a warrior is considered first.

War and religion in Mesopotamia

To explore the presentation of warfare and warriors in *Gilgamesh*, it is useful to consider the role of war in Mesopotamia more broadly. Important for Gilgamesh's identity as both a warrior and a king is the connection between religion and martial conflict.

Battle in ancient Mesopotamia was connected to religion on multiple levels. Warfare may have been undertaken for religious purposes and involved religious and cultic activities. Although wars were waged by mortals, the outcomes of martial conflicts were decided by deities.

Royal annals describe various warrior deities, such as Ninurta and Ishtar, taking an interest in human battles, and deities are featured in iconography engaging in warfare (for a recent analysis, see Karlsson, 2016). Cylinder seals showing Ishtar alongside kings from the Old Babylonian period highlight the intimate relationship between king and deity. There is a reciprocal bond between the pair: the king fights on the deity's behalf, and she shares in his victory. The close connection is further emphasised through depictions of the deity touching the king's shoulder (Ornan, 2014: 582–583). Deities also took part in royal hunts, which symbolically enacted the king's duty of protecting the universal order (Brown, 1999: 355).

The historical king played a crucial role in warfare, and his safety was in the hands of divinities, notably Ishtar, who protected him in battle. The relationship between the human king and the gods in battle was presented as a reciprocally beneficial one in literature, with the king fighting on behalf of deities, who in turn gave him protection, success, and glory.

Battle for Gilgamesh is inextricably linked to religious piety. In the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh and Aga* (ETCSL 1.8.1.1), Gilgamesh succeeds in a war against a difficult enemy through placing his trust in the Sumerian goddess of love and war, Inanna. At other times, the hero's desire for lasting fame puts him at odds with his combined religious and royal responsibilities. The outcomes of the discord between religious observance and personal glory can be seen in the punitive response of the primary deities in response to Gilgamesh's killing of the Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Yet in these examples, and more generally, the relationship of Gilgamesh's warring to religion is presented with great complexity.

As Liverani noted in his monograph on Near Eastern myth and politics, divine help in battle is historically a means of displaying royal legitimacy (2005: 2360). Gilgamesh's success in overcoming his supersized adversaries could be expected to demonstrate his divine

favour, but both the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven incite divine anger. Gilgamesh's identity as a warrior is connected to his role as a king, and the political, social, and religious responsibilities that are a part of that office, yet he fulfils the warrior role in a unique and complex way.

The glory of battle?

The prominence of scenes of warfare in various types of Mesopotamian media might give rise to the assumption that ancient Mesopotamian epic literature glorifies battle. This type of hypothesis may stem from recognition of the prevalence of conflict in epic poetry, the role of heroes as warriors, or the perception of broader traditions of ancient classics as lionising war and combatants. Yet, as Smith perceptively noted in his monograph on the poetic heroes of antiquity, ancient literature from various ancient cultures, such as the Greek heroic epics, the *Gilgamesh* epic and the Hebrew Bible, depict warfare in a complicated manner, at odds with simple expectations surrounding the promotion of glory and honour in battle (2014).

Although battle is presented as capable of bringing glory and enhancing mortal relationships with the divine, this is only one perspective among many. Ancient narrative literature involving conflict frequently gives a darker, grittier, and more chaotic view of war and warriors than initial impressions might allow.

Acknowledging the shadowy presentation of martial conflict in ancient epic literature is a topic with significant relevance for the modern day. Exploring the complexity of ancient views on warfare is necessary for providing balance to discussions centred around warriors and warfare in antiquity. By highlighting the tensions and conflicts within ancient narratives relating to warrior culture, it may be possible to rethink the origins of a central problem in our society. In the process, we further uncover how ancient traditions surrounding the culture of war have influenced modern perceptions of warfare, and how the representation of war in ancient narratives has contributed to distorting the ugliness and destructive chaos that are endemic to the reality of conflict with a sense of "terrible attraction" (Smith, 2014: xiii).

Smith's observation of the complexity of biblical and Classical literature on the topic of battle is important, as comparisons with these ancient literary works are frequently drawn across a variety of

settings. Cross-cultural contrasts are useful for highlighting differences and similarities in different civilisations, with the potential to reveal cultural values, changes and ideals. Yet, there remains a tendency in the drawing of comparisons for scholars to consider their own area of specialisation with more care and nuance than the “foreign” area of contrast. Here, a brief summary of important points involving the complex view of warfare in ancient Mesopotamia is given. While the ancient Mesopotamians seem to have had some distinctive views of warfare, and perhaps even been more peaceable than surrounding cultures, the discussion here is made in awareness of the risks of partiality.

War and peace in the ancient Near East

Gilgamesh and Enkidu are drawn together by their uniquely matched compatibility in battle, and their adventures together are driven by the desire to gain eternal fame through heroic (and bellicose) deeds. Yet, the heroes’ escapades lead to Enkidu’s sudden death, and despite Gilgamesh’s love of fighting, he does not find lasting fulfilment, or a sense of meaning, through conflict.

It is perhaps surprising to find sensitive considerations on the at times negative outcomes of battle in one of the world’s earliest written epics. The Mesopotamian world was shaped by conflict and home to many of the world’s first great empires, including the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian Empires. Territorial expansion was a common product of human conflict. Mesopotamian kings were warriors, who reflected on their achievements through the construction of monuments and royal inscriptions.

As George has noted, “the history of war begins in Iraq” (2013: 39). The earliest evidence for warfare in human history comes from the neighbouring city-states of Lagash and Umma (in modern-day southern Iraq, close to the city of Ash Shatrah), in the mid-third millennium BCE (George, 2013: 39). The cause of the war is thought to have involved an escalation of a dispute over water supplies, and the Stele of Vultures commemorates the eventual victory of Lagash (Hamblin, 2006). The Stele, which has been restored from several fragments, shows a combination of divine and mythical imagery connected to the battle, such as the deity Ningirsu holding a battle-net full of defeated enemies (discussed in Winter, 2010: 3–53).

In modern times, the Assyrian and Babylonian civilisations have

often been associated with conquest and conflict, likely due to the influence of the Hebrew Bible. Prior to the recovery of cuneiform literature, the presentation of Assyrian and Babylonian kings in conflict against Israel and Judah in the biblical text dominated the perception of the Mesopotamian world (Van de Mieroop, 1999: 39). The continued use of “Hebraized” versions of the names of Assyrian kings is noted by Van de Mieroop as an indication of the continuing influence of the biblical view of history (1999: 39). Biblical images of bellicose Mesopotamian kings were transmitted and adapted through the art and literature of Western artists such as Byron, emphasising further the destructive powers of the Mesopotamians (Van de Mieroop, 1999: 39).

Yet, the evidence from Mesopotamia, both in material evidence and literature, seems more nuanced than these impressions may suggest. A recent comparative study of archaeological evidence, for example, argues for a less violent environment in Mesopotamia than in its neighbouring areas (Soltysiak, 2017). The literary and artistic presentation of warfare in Mesopotamia shows complexity and dynamism.

Warfare is not presented in uniformly glorified or positive terms in Mesopotamian literature. The themes of warfare and peace in Mesopotamian literature have been explored by Foster (2007b), who shows that the Mesopotamians held complex views about the role of violence in the cosmos. Foster gives the example of the *Erra Epic* as “perhaps the most powerful denunciation of war to come down to us from the ancient world” (2007b: 75). The Akkadian *Erra Epic* (also known as *Erra and Ishum*) is a Babylonian poetic composition, relating the deeds of Erra, the Mesopotamian deity of pestilence and in the *Erra Epic*, a warrior. It is often dated to the eighth century BCE (see George, 2013: 47, for an overview of dating and further bibliography). The authorship of the poem is ascribed to the Babylonian poet, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, and it relates the war-mongering deeds of Erra (questions around the historicity of Kabti-ilani-Marduk are discussed in Sasson, 2005: 223).

In the opening of the poem, the deity debates with himself, his advisor (Ishum) and his weapons, the Seven. Once he eventually commits himself to conflict, Erra’s violence rages out of control, even in the face of other deities who try to end the war. It is through Ishum that the bloody conflict is finally ended (despite Ishum’s earlier role in encouraging Erra to go to battle). George perceptively notes that the motif of the cautious servant advising against warfare is found in

several other Mesopotamian compositions, such as the Sumerian narrative *Lugale* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2013: 44).

The horror of the other deities at Erra's unstoppable and indiscriminate killing echoes the reaction of the deities to the tragedy of the Flood in Tablet X of *Gilgamesh*. In this scene from *Gilgamesh*, the deities criticise Enlil for his reckless killing, and suggest other alternatives to the Flood—including allowing Erra to arise and “slaughter the land” (*Gilgamesh* SBV X: 195). Although presented as preferable to the Flood in *Gilgamesh*, the war-mongering of the *Erra Epic* presents the terrible reality of the undiscerning and reckless destruction resulting from armed conflict. As Foster observes, the *Erra Epic* illustrates that violence needs to be feared for its limitless destructive potential (2005: 880). The ability of conflict to escalate uncontrollably is shown in the *Erra Epic* to risk sweeping away “all the hopes and accomplishments of civilization,” and undoing the divine order of the cosmos (Foster, 2005: 880).

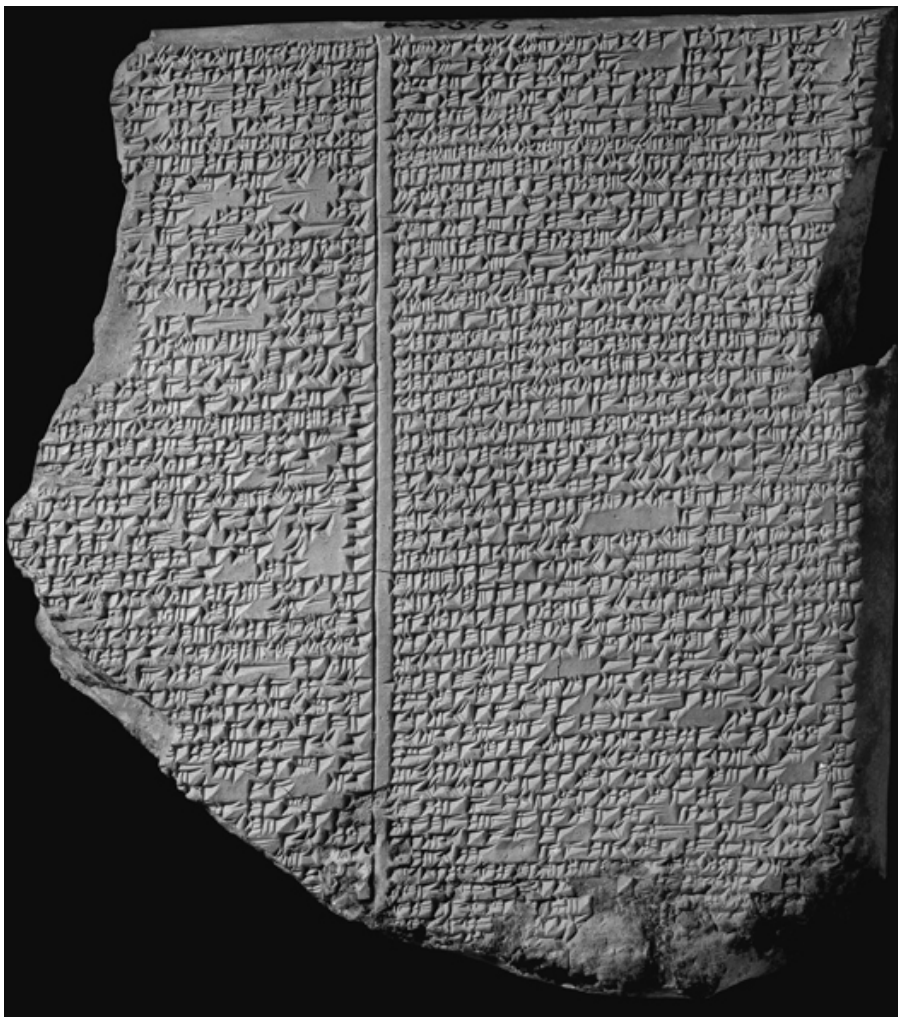


Figure 2.1 Flood Tablet, SBV Gilgamesh. Part of a clay tablet, upper right corner. Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet 11, story of the Flood. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

Warfare and kingship

Gilgamesh's identity as a warrior is informed by his role as king of Uruk, and the responsibilities of kingship carried with them the benefit of especially close divine connections. The role of king as it connected to warfare in Mesopotamia changed over time: it was not until around the 26th century BCE that Mesopotamian rulers began to become associated with military symbols (Richardson, 2011: 17), such as inscribed mace-heads or the famous Standard of Ur. Prior to this, in the Uruk period, rulers were presented as hunters or elite priests, and

records emphasised agricultural administration and scribal training (Richardson, 2011: 17) (for a detailed account of the historical march of warfare into Mesopotamian state ideology, see Richardson, 2011).

The role of the Mesopotamian king was bound to the dispensation of divine justice and maintenance of cosmic order. This was challenging work—while the earthly order was thought to reflect the cosmic order, the ideal state of the cosmos could not be entirely recreated on earth, where mortal rulers reigned alongside immortal deities (Alster, 1974). In literary texts and material culture, the participation of historical Mesopotamian kings in warfare is presented as closely related to the divine world. As Noegel observes, the creation and maintenance of universal order is referenced in the wall decorations from Assyrian palaces (2007b).

Warfare contained a dangerous potential for creation and destruction. The alignment of the king's role in battle with divine prerogatives was a necessary insurance against the disruptive potential of wanton warfare.

Warfare in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The diversity of divine views surrounding warfare found in the broader context of Mesopotamian literature can also be seen in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh is the recipient of divine guidance and support at numerous times in his adventures. This support comes primarily from his mother Ninsun and Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun deity, but other deities assist him as well, including Anu, the sky deity. The support of deities plays a critically important role in the narrative, and present as a decisive element in the warrior's battles. When fighting against Humbaba, Gilgamesh is assisted by Shamash, who seems to shout advice and encouragement to the young king (SBV IV: 194–198).

Conflict can at times draw the anger of the deities, rather than their support. This is most obvious in Tablet VI, involving Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar's romantic advances. Ishtar's role in broader Mesopotamian literature and religion would support an expectation in the audience that the goddess would be expected to fight alongside the king. Instead, the king and the goddess are presented fighting one another. Interestingly, this conflict between goddess and king has also been presented in the artistic representation of the battle with the Bull of Heaven. A cylinder seal thought to be from the Neo-Assyrian period

has been noted by Green to show Ishtar looking on in horror as the heroes fight against the Bull, and even attempting to intervene and physically restrain them (1997: 139).

The warriors also show an awareness that their aggressive behaviour might offend the deities when killing Humbaba, further reflecting the delicate balance of human and divine relations in the *Epic*. In the battle in the Cedar Forest, a complicated relationship between warfare and religion is presented. Gilgamesh and Enkidu note they will earn the anger of Enlil for killing the forest guardian, and they also seemingly consider the potential for upsetting Shamash—without whom there would most likely have been no victory. Interestingly, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is the bond between the warrior and the deity which seems to provide the most accurate indication of divine support or opposition to the warring behaviour, rather than the appropriateness or divine sanctioning of this behaviour.

Divination and sacrifice

The primacy of the bond between the warrior and their deity, noted earlier, then places a sure emphasis on the importance of positive communication and connection between the mortal and immortal characters. The relationship between mortals and immortals in Mesopotamian literature is a complex matter, but it is important to emphasise the reciprocity of relations between humans and deities.

In Mesopotamian poetic literature the human/divine connection is not solely beneficial to either party, with a great deal at stake on both sides of the relationship. The vital nature of the divine/human connection brings an element of risk to relations between deities and humans. Engagement between the divine and human worlds could be dangerous and destructive, and capable of jeopardising the survival of humankind, animals, and the natural world. Although the conceptual boundaries separating the human and divine worlds contained only limited permeability, in literature there were numerous ways for humans and deities to interact. Communication could take many forms, including sacrifice, attendance of festivals, dedicatory offerings and building works, prayer, song, direct and indirect dialogue, omens, prophecy, and divinely inspired dreams (Pryke, 2016a).

Connection and communication between mortals and immortals are related to success and survival in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Effective

communication is important for drawing divine assistance, with divination, incubation, prayer and sacrifice all featuring prominently in the narrative. Despite the significance of clear communication between the warrior and the gods, religious rituals involving communication do not always go smoothly for Gilgamesh. While others such as Ninsun are shown capably managing prayers and rituals for gaining Shamash's help, and correctly interpreting dreams, the two young warriors, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, appear to misinterpret dreams and bungle sacrifices.

After their martial victories over Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, the two warriors make offerings to the deities. In the Cedar Forest, this offering is in the form of a door made from forest wood. After the death of the Bull of Heaven, the animal's body is dismembered and its heart offered to Shamash. The creature's leg is thrown at Ishtar, in a scene which contrasts Gilgamesh's relationships between the two deities:

After killing the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh offers the creature's heart as a sacrifice to Shamash (Sumerian Utu) (VI. 147–150). The offering of a sacrifice to Shamash, using part of the dead Bull, shows Gilgamesh and Enkidu attempting to give appropriate religious observance to the gods, behaviour which ideally leads to an increased intimacy and favour with the divine ... Juxtaposed against this offering to Shamash, in the next few lines, is the description of Enkidu throwing the Bull's haunch at Ishtar (VI. 151–157). The contrast of the usage of the Bull's body parts, linked to the heroes' relations with the twin deities Shamash and Ishtar, makes Enkidu's throwing of the haunch darkly humorous—it functions as microcosm of the heroes' improper treatment of the goddess, by offering a kind of parody on 'illegitimate' sacrifice.

(Pryke, 2017a)

The diversity of divine roles and stances surrounding conflict in the narrative is not limited to the deities' direct engagement with the *Epic's* protagonist. At several points in the narrative of the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*, deities show different perspectives on warfare and the correct conduct of combatants. Ishtar and Anu (and in the Sumerian version, Inanna and An) disagree over the goddess' plan to fight with Gilgamesh, and as noted earlier, Enlil and Shamash are seemingly on different sides of Gilgamesh's conflict with Humbaba. Waging war in *Gilgamesh*, then, is not presented in simple

terms. The pursuit of conflict is not a set path to divine favour, and warfare, even with some divine support, does not necessarily lead to closer relations between humans and deities.

War and peace

For a narrative that, on one level, glorifies the heroic abilities and achievements of a great legendary king, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents an intricate and profound perspective on physical and military conflict. Characters in the myth who present the hero with their wisdom regarding the human condition do not suggest he commit himself to further conquest on behalf of Uruk. Instead, they recommend the quieter fulfilment that comes from the enjoyment of life's simple pleasures, such as can be found in close family connections—at times drawing direct comparisons between the pleasures of family and home and the destructive capacity of battle.

When Gilgamesh finally succeeds in his quest to discover the legendary Flood survivor, Utanapishtim, in Tablet X of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, he does not find the immortality that he seeks. However, Utanapishtim shares his wisdom with Gilgamesh, including his special knowledge of the inevitability of death for mortals. Utanapishtim has a particularly compelling perspective on the issue of mortality, as he (and his wife) has the gift of immortality, gained from deities (considered in [Chapter 1](#)). As one of the few humans to have experienced mortality and immortality, Utanapishtim's advice is particularly well-suited to addressing Gilgamesh's concerns.

To illustrate his point about mortality, Utanapishtim uses a series verbal contrasts, all relating to the sudden and unpredictable nature of death:

At some time we build a household,
at some time we start a family,
at some time the brothers divide,
at some time feuds arise in the land.

(SBV X: 308–311)

The division of the brothers, and the rising feuds in the land, are presented as negative events that are paralleled with death in Utanapishtim's speech. At the same time, the building of a household and establishment of a family are presented as positive activities connected to life. In this section of Utanapishtim's speech, life is

connected to events that draw humans together, and death is related to occasions that draw them apart. Battle, then, is presented in Utanapishtim's speech in a negative light that relates to early death.

In the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, and in Tablet XII of the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh and Enkidu discuss the things Enkidu has seen in the Netherworld. Again, in this composition, Gilgamesh is provided with a unique perspective on an issue relating to mortality, from a character with a special insight into the concept. Enkidu relays to Gilgamesh the fates in the "after-life" of different categories of people, in response to his friend's questioning:

(Gilgamesh:) 'Did you see the young man who never undressed his wife?' (Enkidu:) 'I saw him.' 'How does he fare?' 'You finish a rope, and he weeps over the rope.' 'Did you see the young woman who never undressed her husband?' 'I saw her.' 'How does she fare?' 'You finish a reed mat, and she weeps over the reed mat.'

(*Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

In Enkidu's description, the fates of people in the after-life are closely related to their activities and status while living. The importance of family for a relatively happy and comfortable experience of the Netherworld is a recurring theme of the dialogue. The number of a man's sons is presented as influencing the man's experience after death. While a man who had one son is described "weeps bitterly at the wooden peg which was driven into his wall," a man with five sons is described as "indefatigable, (and) he enters the palace easily" (ETCSL 1.1.8.4). A man with six sons is noted for his cheerfulness in the afterlife, and the man with seven sons sits upon a throne and becomes a companion to deities, listening to (presumably divine) judgements.

The number of male descendants is not the only feature that influences the experience of the dead in the Netherworld. The treatment of family members is also significant in terms of the improvement or deterioration of the position of the deceased. Gilgamesh enquires after the fates of those who had no respect for the words of their mothers and fathers ("O my body! O my limbs!' he never ceases to cry"). He also asks after the man cursed by his mother and father ("He is deprived of an heir. His spirit roams about"). Religious piety and the manner of death are two further issues that are presented in the dialogue as having an influence on afterlife

experience.

Within this context, death in battle is presented as bringing sorrow to the warrior's loved ones:

(Gilgamesh): 'Did you see him who fell in battle? ... How does he fare?' 'His father and mother are not there to hold his head, and his wife weeps.'

(ETCSL 1.8.1.4)

The warrior's fate is presented slightly differently in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*:

'Did you see the one who was killed in battle?' 'I [saw (him).] His father and mother honour his memory and his wife [weeps] over him.'

(SBV XII: 148–149)

The experience of the person who has died in battle in both compositions is not necessarily a reflection of a pacifist perspective in the narrative. Several other fates are described for those who have died violently, such as the man eaten by a lion or a dog, who bewails his lost limbs, or the man who was consumed by fire.

What is interesting, however, is the continued focus on participation in physical conflict resulting in premature separation from family and loved ones—this is especially clearly presented in the translation of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* by Attinger, who notes that a paraphrase of the Sumerian suggests the battlefield is a place where the warrior's mother cannot support him (2015). The mourning of the family members left behind is emphasised in the texts, which likely relates to the provision of funerary offerings for the deceased. In both the Sumerian and Akkadian versions, the fate of the warrior and his family is immediately followed by the fate of those who are not properly buried, and those who are not provided with offerings. In both versions, the impact and burden on the family of the loss of the warrior is emphasised. The potential of death in battle to cause grief for loved ones is further explored in both narratives through the reaction of Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, to his dangerous quests (considered in [Chapter 4](#)).

Careful religious observance, such as the provision of food offerings from loved ones and dealing faithfully with deities, is necessary in the context of the dialogue between Gilgamesh and Enkidu to avoid poor conditions in the afterlife, creating the expectation that religious piety

may improve the circumstances of the deceased. This conclusion is in line with the presentation of the experience of the dead in broader Mesopotamian literature.

The presence of pacifism in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been noted by Harris, who considers the polemic against warfare to be a subtle refutation of the historical reality of war:

The Standard Babylonian Version (of Gilgamesh) perhaps contains a subliminal polemic against the millennia-old royal ideals of war and conquest and of military prowess. It has been noted that the battle scenes in the late version, compared with earlier versions of the Gilgamesh Epic, are surprisingly brief and 'remarkably free of detail.' Indeed, there is almost 'an ellipsis of battle' in the epic. Jacobsen has commented on the 'climate of constant wars, riots, and disorders' in the early first millennium. Long before this, Sin-leqi-unni may have subtly polemicized against age-old military ambitions. It was particularly fitting then that he selected the paradigmatic warrior hero of eons before as the exemplar of the superiority of maturity and learning.

(2000: 50)

Despite the glorification of Gilgamesh as a warrior, the pursuit of conflict in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is portrayed in a complex manner that involves a subtle combination of positive and negative elements. Conflict shapes the warrior's journey, but there are clear limits to what may be won through military means.

Conflict

At the outset of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the gaining of glory and fame through battle is foremost among the hero's thoughts. This idea is expressed multiple times in the narrative, and motivates the heroes' conquest of the Cedar Forest (Smith, 2014: xii). Conflict for Gilgamesh is not restricted to the physical sphere, he also engages in verbal battles, as well as calling upon supernatural elements for support when necessary. Despite the variety of Gilgamesh's approaches to conflict, his battle strategies frequently betray a tendency to underestimate the capabilities of his opponents, and a lack of the necessary forethought to perceive the outcome of his actions. Gilgamesh's failure to seriously consider the possible negative consequences of his actions is shown in the narrative through the lens

of the reactions of other characters to his plans. By foregrounding alternative perspectives to that of the rash young king, the composers of the narrative highlight the potential danger of the coming conflict. This literary technique results in an increase in suspense prior to the battles, but also emphasises the individuality of Gilgamesh's character and outlook.

In Tablet II of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh decides to go to the Forest of Cedars, and to confront the forest guardian, Humbaba. Only Gilgamesh thinks this is a good idea—Enkidu, the elders of Uruk and Gilgamesh's mother all see the adventure as unacceptably dangerous, and attempt to talk Gilgamesh out of going. Enkidu is the first of the group to voice his concerns to Gilgamesh:

Enkidu [opened his] mouth [to speak, saying to Gilgameš:]

‘How can we [go, my friend, to the Forest of Cedar?

In order to keep the cedars safe,

Enlil made it his destiny to be the terror of the people.

(SBV: 217–219a)

Enkidu's concerns are based on having encountered Humbaba in the past: he has first-hand knowledge of the hazards posed by the forest guardian. Enkidu's resistance to the conquest proposed by Gilgamesh creates a contrast between the royal protagonist and those around him—Enkidu, like the elders and Ninsun, has more experience than Gilgamesh, and is more knowledgeable about the wilderness.

Enkidu's repeated efforts to convince Gilgamesh of the dangers of the Cedar Forest shows touches of irony. Later in the *Epic*, when Humbaba has been captured, the forest guardian reminds Enkidu of their previous encounters, and how he had the opportunity to kill him, but mercifully allowed him to live. Enkidu's response to this reminder is to urge Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, perhaps demonstrating his increasing separation from his previous life as a man of the wilds (Barron, 2002), or possibly jealousy (see [Chapter 6](#)). This development in Enkidu's characterisation reaches full effect in his fight against the Bull of Heaven.

The ability to perceive the future results of current actions is not beyond Gilgamesh's reach in the *Epic*. Other characters, such as Ninsun, show that knowledge of the future is possible in the world of the narrative, through a combination of life experience, knowledge and the correct interpretation of divine signs. Indeed, the outcome of future events can, at times, be altered in the text if the outcome is at

first accurately predicted, and then appropriate steps are taken to enlist divine aid. The ability to enlist divine aid is, again, within Gilgamesh's reach, but not always utilised in a manner that would best promote his interests. Despite Gilgamesh's varied approaches to conflict, it is not until the end of his journey that he shows the ability to resist the rush to battle.

Gilgamesh the warrior

From the beginning of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh is presented with numerous qualities which make him well suited to the role of a warrior. Firstly, there is his physicality. Gilgamesh is described in Tablet I in terms of his superlative physical size and strength:

Surpassing all (other) kings, hero endowed with a superb
physique,
Brave native of Uruk, butting wild bull!
Going at the fore he was the leader,
Going also at the rear, the trust of his brothers!

(SBV I: 29–32)

Despite the potential logistical problems of Gilgamesh both leading the way and guarding the back of his army, Gilgamesh is presented in the text as strong both in terms of his physical form, and in his capacity for leadership. The hero's body is further described as both large and well-formed:

Wild Bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgameš, perfect of strength,
Suckling of the exalted cow, Wild-Cow Ninsun!
Gilgameš so tall, perfect and terrible ...
Gilgameš was his name from the day he was born,
Two-thirds of him god but a third of him human.
Bēlet-ilī drew the shape of his body,
Nudimmud brought his form to perfection.

(SBV I: 35–37, 47–50)

The lines of the text from Tablet I describing Gilgamesh's physical form are reproduced earlier to emphasise the close connection made in the narrative between Gilgamesh's unusually large and attractive body, and his quasi-divine origins. Gilgamesh is not like other humans in appearance, and he also has greater physical capacities than other

mortals. As Shamhat notes later in Tablet I, Gilgamesh has no equal in strength and his stamina is sufficiently prodigious that he does not require rest (which is an interesting and somewhat paradoxical observation considering Gilgamesh's frequent habit of napping and dreaming).

The close connection of Gilgamesh's superlative physicality with his divine heritage in the text suggests that the two aspects of his identity are causally related. At the same time, Gilgamesh's singular appearance foreshadows his exceptional adventures in the narrative. The hero's great size and strength, a product of his quasi-divinity, fit him for battle with opponents who are also unusually large and who have supernatural qualities. Gilgamesh's unrivalled capacity for physical activity in Tablet I leads to the creation of Enkidu, whose massive size and strength similarly equip him for gigantic conquests.

This fellow (Enkidu)—how similar to Gilgamesh he is in build,
He is tall in stature, majestic as a battlement.
For sure he was born in the hills,
His strength is as mighty as a lump of rock from the sky.

(SBV II: 40–43)

Like Gilgamesh, Enkidu's origins are connected in the text to his unusual physicality. Both of the heroes come from unusual backgrounds which make it impossible for them to fit in to common society, and at the same time, equip them for battle in exceptional ways. Enkidu, like Gilgamesh, is described as handsome and “god-like,” and he is presented as a powerful combatant.

Gilgamesh's divine parentage and his role of king of Uruk also make him well-suited for the life of a warrior. Gilgamesh's divine mother Ninsun has special access to the primary deities and uses this access to protect her impetuous son. As the king of Uruk, too, Gilgamesh has a special relationship with the divine, bringing greater than average potential for accessing divine protection.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu as warriors

We have seen that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are presented as superlatively strong warriors from the beginning of the Epic. Despite their different origins, the physical capacities of the two heroes are almost equal. At several points in the narrative, the strength of each hero is compared against the other. The hunter who first sees Enkidu

in the forest describes him to Gilgamesh as “the mightiest in the land.” Later in the same tablet, Shamhat describes Gilgamesh’s strength to Enkidu in a similar manner:

(Gilgamesh) is fair in manhood, he has dignified bearing,
His whole person is graced with charm.
He has a strength more mighty than you,
He is unsleeping by day and by night.

(SBV I: 236–239)

Although both heroes are described by others as similar in their unusual strength, the manner of their description emphasises their different backgrounds. Gilgamesh is described as beloved by Shamash, where Enkidu is presented as roaming the wilderness and protecting his animal herd. The meeting between Enkidu and Gilgamesh is considered further in [Chapter 4](#).

Warfare and gender in *Gilgamesh*

In recent years, feminist theorists have identified numerous aspects of war involving gender, although a unified approach to the topic remains elusive (see Sjoberg, 2013). In studies of the ancient world, the gendered violence of warfare has been the subject of numerous useful works of scholarship (see for example Heineman, 2011, and Deacy and McHardy, 2015). In terms of performance, history, and conception, battle has been shown to be a gendered event (Sjoberg, 2013: 44). For the purposes of this volume, gender is defined as a societal role which is performed, with different cultures constructing varying paradigms that determine two (or more) genders (Zsolnay, 2010: 391). Female and male are biological terms, and masculine and feminine relate to gender. In Mesopotamia, the two concepts were related, with biological sex understood as an element of the body, upon which gender was inscribed (Asher-Greve, 1998). Although the different gender roles and behaviours were based on different sexes, they were not biologically predetermined, instead having their roots in processes of socialisation (explored more fully in Asher-Greve, 2002: 11–21).

With the battleground identified as a gendered terrain, the masculinity of the warrior was an important marker of his identity. In his discussion of the concept of masculinity in Mesopotamia, Cooper notes that to be a man, in contrast to a woman, meant to be a

competent warrior (Cooper, 2017: 120). This *sine qua non* of Mesopotamian masculinity was particularly significant for the king, who historically led the army. The awareness that the roles of the heroic warrior and the king were conceptually bound to masculinity should not overshadow the intricacy of the manner in which gender was evoked in the warrior culture of Mesopotamian literature.

The gendered environment of the battlefield was not solely a male preserve, but involved both masculine and feminine imagery. In mythic narratives, female deities participated in battle, and in royal praise poetry, the goddess Ishtar was described fighting on the king's behalf, and urging him into battle (Pryke, 2017a). In visual sources, Ishtar could be seen with a diverse array of weapons and leading manacled prisoners of war.

Within the expression of masculinity, there is variety in the presentation of the ideology of “manliness.” The characterisation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as warriors informs on the ways in which they inhabit gender roles in the narrative. Enkidu is at times described in “feminine” terms, Gilgamesh covers him “like a bride.” Yet Gilgamesh is also presented at times in a manner more commonly associated with “feminine” characters. Ishtar's proposal to Gilgamesh in Tablet VI has been noted for its inversion of gender roles, with the “feminine” partner proposing to the “masculine” one. Ishtar's lusty response to the bathing Gilgamesh has been recognised and thoughtfully discussed by Walls in his monograph on desire in Mesopotamian myth (2001: 35, also Harris, 1986) as an inverted type scene. Commonly in this literary trope, it is the bathing female who attracts the covetous gaze of the male, following the Mesopotamian view that sexuality first begins with the female (Budin, 2015: 2) but in Tablet VI, gender roles are reversed.

Gilgamesh's opponents

Gilgamesh fights numerous battles in the Standard Version of the *Epic*, and there are further conflicts for the young king outside of the *Epic*. The Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh and Aga* (considered in [Chapter 1](#)), shows the king in a battle that aligns closely with what might be expected for the royal duties of a Mesopotamian king—he fights a hostile rival leader, from another city, one who threatens Uruk. The theme of the hero's battle to protect his home city from aggressive rivals is a relatively common one in Mesopotamian heroic epics.

Two Sumerian narratives featuring the heroic protagonist Enmerkar feature a battle between the king and his rivals, although these battles both involve considerable supernaturalism. In *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, the king succeeds due to his close relationship with the love deity, Inanna. The narrative of *Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna*, also features Inanna, with two rival kings fighting for her divine favour. The contest culminates in a battle of wizardry fought by two human proxies. The proxy for Enmerkar is the wise woman Sagburu, a figure noted by Gadotti as one of very few women mentioned by name in the Old Babylonian Sumerian literary corpus (2011: 196). The battle of wizardry involves the two opponents conjuring various animals, who are charged with the actual fighting. The victory of Sumer's white magic over the black magic of Aratta shows its moral superiority, and the focus on food supply shows the critical nature of divine favour (Vanstiphout, 2003: 26).

It is uncertain whether *Gilgamesh and Aga* is based on ancient historical events, yet the events of the plot seem more overtly historically based than some of the king's other battles against supernatural opponents. The sense of historicity, even if present in the text as a literary conceit, is echoed in the theme of the "rival leader" as an opponent in the royal narratives of historical Mesopotamian kings. Indeed, some royal epics contain motifs very close to those that appear in the epics of legendary heroes. An Akkadian epic of King Sargon (c. 2334–2279) known as the *Epic of Sargon* involves the king's ability to avoid a trap set by Ur-Zababa of Kish by reading a cuneiform document, possibly alluding to the invention of cuneiform referenced in the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (Noegel, 2005: 238).

Defending the home city from usurpation is a commonly seen plotline in other Mesopotamian myths, including the narrative of *Gilgamesh and Aga*. While in other traditions kings (including Gilgamesh) must fight to protect their home, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero sets out on a dangerous journey.

Although the lust for fame is a commonly accepted motivation for action in the modern day, the self-seeking nature of Gilgamesh's journey strikes a discordant note when considered in the broader traditions of epic literature. Instead of setting out on a quest on behalf of the gods, Gilgamesh must use divination to get the gods to fight on his behalf. Instead of bringing joy to Ishtar's heart, he brings her to tears.

The hero's journey

When writing about the best known of all Mesopotamian heroes, it is worth a pause to consider what the term “hero” might mean when applied to Gilgamesh. The term “hero” is problematic when applied to Mesopotamian literature, as it reflects different meanings in different historical periods and contexts (Durand, Römer, and Langois, 2011). The blurred line between historical kings and legendary heroes was noted in [Chapter 1](#), and Gilgamesh is particularly immune to tidy categorisation, due to the multiple traditions associated with this figure, the broad reach of his legend, and the complexity of his character. This chapter considers how Gilgamesh's roles as a warrior and a hero contribute to his identity, and for this purpose, the term “hero” is used to describe the young king's role in performing exceptional deeds of lasting significance.

Gilgamesh's heroic career is framed in the *Epic* as a great feat of exploration, which as George observes, is evidenced by three achievements in particular (2003: 92). These feats are the opening of passages in the mountains, digging wells in the uplands, and travelling across the oceans in search of Utanapishtim (2003: 92). These achievements are part of Gilgamesh's identification within the epic, and in the broader literary traditions of Babylonia.

In his article on the characterisation of Near Eastern heroes, Alster observes that Mesopotamian heroes undertake activities involving a combination of unique elements with paradigmatic patterns (1974). Gilgamesh's exploratory exploits require heroic stamina, but also frame him as a kind of cultural hero (George, 2003: 98). Gilgamesh's achievements could be largely attributable to his divine pedigree, royal status, help from others, and luck, but George rightly points out the role of the hero's ingenuity in his successes. An example of this may be seen when Gilgamesh dives to the very depths of the ocean in search of the plant that would give him renewed youth. In Tablet XI, Gilgamesh prepares to hunt down the plant by opening a channel to the watery depths, and then tying weights to his feet to aid his descent (SBV XI: 287–293). In noting this and other examples of Gilgamesh's innovations, George comments:

On each occasion it seems that Gilgamesh's inventiveness enabled him to develop a new technology to perform a previously impossible task. These passages speak for a tendency to attribute the discovery of new knowledge (and the rediscovery of old) to a

great hero in the distant past, and are probably examples of aetiological folklore.

(George, 2003: 98)

Of course, while Gilgamesh may break new ground with his discoveries, it may not have been easy for others to follow in his path and benefit from the hero's innovation. In Tablet XI, after finding and then losing the youth-renewing herb, Gilgamesh laments that he cannot return to the depths to repeat his discovery, as he has lost his tools and his landmarks have become obscured:

Now for twenty leagues the tide has been rising!
When I opened the channel I abandoned the tools:
What thing would I find that was placed (to serve) for my
landmark?

(SBV XI: 315–317)

Gilgamesh's lament demonstrates the significant difficulty of following in the footsteps of legendary heroes—even for the heroes themselves. Gilgamesh's contribution remains substantial, however, as he has shown that a previously unknown feat could, in the right circumstances, be achieved.

Heroic figures in Mesopotamian literature show a predilection for journeying to faraway places. Travel was connected to religiosity, with travel often associated with honouring Mesopotamian deities, and the historical observance of cult festivals (Feuerherm, 2011). Long journeys provided legendary figures with opportunities for discovery, fame, and material gain. Travel in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* offered the chance for new experiences, and to meet new characters, yet these experiences were not always presented positively. Travel also presented the hero with the potential for danger. The dangers of travel took numerous forms, including the potential of attacks from wild creatures, watery peril—even sunstroke.

The impact of Gilgamesh's long journey, and his exposure to the elements, is noted by Ur-Shanabi in Tablet X of the Standard Babylonian Version, where he asks the hero:

Why are your cheeks hollow, your face sunken,
Your mood wretched, your features wasted?
Why is there sorrow in your heart,
And your face is like one who has travelled a distant road?
Why is it your face is burnt by frost and sunshine,

And you roam the wild got up like a lion?

(SBV X: 113–118)

The importance of this description on Gilgamesh's characterisation was considered in [Chapter 1](#), but it is worth noting here as an example of the dangers that were inherit in the heroic activity of voyaging. Other less tangible dangers were related to journeying away from home, such as the potential for disconnection between the heroic figures and their homes, families, and patron deities.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the young king takes two iconic voyages, first to the Cedar Forest, and then to the land beyond the Path of the Sun. The symmetry of the two voyages is often noted in scholarship, and both journeys are foundational to the development of Gilgamesh's character. With the focus in this book on the hero's identity, it is relevant to consider the means in which travel can be used in narrative explore to contrasts between what is "familiar," and what is "foreign." Travel to distant lands provided the opportunity for contrasts between the new territory discovered and the character's home, with this environmental juxtaposition providing new perspectives on the characters and their point of origin.

In more ways than one, Gilgamesh is in good company in his heroic travels. As well as having the companionship of Enkidu (at least for a while), Gilgamesh's travels connect him with the journeys of other Mesopotamian heroes, and even deities, in broader Mesopotamian literary traditions. In narrative literature, heroes and deities could be shown journeying across long distances, and having exotic adventures.

Frequently visited locations for deities included the Netherworld and the heavens, places that were also at times visited by heroes. Travel for Mesopotamian deities was not limited to myth, they were also believed to travel in the day-to-day world (Feuerherm, 2001: 84). The association of socially elite and divine characters with long journeys further contributed to the heroic image of epic travel (Bachvarova, 2016: 209–210). Of course, travelling to faraway places was not an activity entirely limited to heroes and deities: in the Babylonian story the *Legend of Etana*, considered later in this chapter, the king travels to heaven on the back of an eagle—with the bird presumably also reaching this distant and mystical destination.

Often, the liminal quality of heroes could be expressed through the fantastical qualities of their epic journeys (see the discussion of the liminality of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Mandell, 1997). In the *Etana* legend (considered in greater detail in [Chapter 4](#)), the king's travel is

in support of finding a supernatural solution to a common human problem.

While the details of the problem differ, the motivation of seeking an extraordinary means to fix a mundane issue is shared by the protagonist of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Etana's case, however, the problem is childlessness—a problem which, though common, holds the potential for a great deal of heartache. Etana's lack of an heir is particularly problematic due to his role as a king. The similarities with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are further shown in the assistance rendered by Shamash to both heroes. Gilgamesh and Etana also both have dreams about their travels preceding the voyage in the narrative, and both heroes search for a magical plant capable of superseding mortal limitations. The plant would give Etana the heir he desires, and Gilgamesh's plant offers renewed youth.

It is possible a further similarity between the journeys of Etana and Gilgamesh might be found in their inability to use the supernatural vegetation that they seek. Due to the fragmentary state of the evidence, it is unknown whether Etana's journey to the heavens was successful. The presence of Etana's son Balih ruling the city of Kish in the *Sumerian King List* has been taken as a possible indication of a successful trip, but the evidence is not incontestable. In noting similarities in the narrative journeys of Gilgamesh, Etana, and Adapa, Haul makes the insightful observation that the unsuccessful quests of the two former heroes raises questions over the success of the latter (2000: 17–18). In these myths, as in many others from diverse ancient cultures, the secrets of gaining access to supernatural abilities is presented as being guarded by deities (Siciliano, 1981: 195).

A journey to heaven is also taken by Adapa, in the Akkadian story of *Adapa and the South Wind*. The narrative of Adapa also centres on a mortal stretching beyond the normal limits of the human condition. Adapa is a mortal who is given the gift of wisdom by Ea. It is difficult to be entirely sure of the meaning of Adapa's story, but, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the myth is concerned with exploring the distinction between humans and deities, particularly in terms of immortality and wisdom (Izre'el, 2001: 123). Scholars have argued that Adapa may have been offered the secret to eternal life while in heaven, but that in rejecting the food and water of life, he lost immortality for himself, and possibly also for humanity.

Like many other heroic destinations, trips to heaven were fraught with risk. As Horowitz notes, in the *Assyrian Dream Book* (a collection of dream omens more fragmentary than the title may suggest),

dreaming of a trip to heaven may be a sign of a brief lifespan (Horowitz, 1998: 45). The connection in the *Dream Book* between dreaming of a distant, supernatural destination and the possibility of an early death sharply contrasts concepts of humanity and divinity, mortality and immortality, and emphasises the liminality of heroic journeys. In the case of Etana, Horowitz further notes references in the text to Etana's death and the presence of his ghost, following the king's dreams of his trip to heaven:

Thus the prophecy of the 'Assyrian Dream Book' concerning dreams of ascent to heaven may have been fulfilled.

(Horowitz, 1998: 45)

Mesopotamian heroes performed great deeds and made important discoveries, often providing the first example of an activity or journey that would later become traditional. In this way, the activities of heroes show the liminality of the heroes themselves, as they continually find new paths and expand the limits of human knowledge. This heroic activity is accompanied by great risk, both for the hero, and their whole community. The frequently aetiological value of the hero's deeds speaks to the lasting significance of their achievements in the cultural traditions of ancient Mesopotamia.

Gilgamesh the pacifist?

After an extremely long journey, and almost at the end of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh goes to visit Utanapishtim. The audience has been primed for the encounter; Gilgamesh has stated several times his intention to visit the distant home of the Flood survivor, and to secure from him the secret to eternal life. He has stated this purpose to the Scorpion People, Siduri and Ur-Shanabi. Utanapishtim also has been prepared for the encounter, having watched Gilgamesh preparing the boat with Ur-Shanabi in Tablet X. The text cleverly juxtaposes Gilgamesh's need to build a boat to seek eternal life in Tablet X, with Utanapishtim's boat-building for survival (and eternal life) in Tablet XI, causing the audience to once again consider the two kings in contrast.

Utanapishtim's boat-building is divinely inspired and the product of his close relationship with Ea. On Utanapishtim's boat are a multitude of animals, the wealth of the land, Utanapishtim's family and craftspeople "of every skill" (SBV XI: 81–86). Gilgamesh's boat contains himself and the ferryman. The outcome of Utanapishtim's

boat-building is eternal life for himself and his wife, and the salvation of humanity and the secret rites of the Mesopotamian deities. Gilgamesh's boat-building is directed towards his own survival, but seemingly also results in the continuation of the secret divine rites.

With the suspense at a peak, Gilgamesh and Utanapishtim finally meet in Tablet X. In [Chapter 1](#), we explored the implications of this meeting on Gilgamesh in his role as a king. In his identity as a warrior, too, the meeting with Utanapishtim is pivotal. Having reached the end of his journey, Gilgamesh observes his own inability to fight against the Flood survivor:

I was fully intent on doing battle with you,
[but] in your presence my hand is stayed.

(SBV XI: 5–6)

As noted in the previous chapter, no explanation is given as to the cause of Gilgamesh's sudden case of nonaggression, yet the change does seem to be a lasting one.

After the meeting with Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh's long streak of success in conflict comes to an end. He loses the fight to stay awake after hearing Utanapishtim's speech, and agrees to return home without further conquest. His response to the theft of his plant of immortality by the snake is an emotional one, but instead of attempting to fight the snake, he sits down and cries (SBV XI: 308–309). Most importantly, after meeting Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh understands that he cannot win the fight against his own mortality:

How should I go on, Ūta-napišti? Where should I go?
The Thief has taken hold of my [flesh].
In my bed-chamber Death abides,
And wherever I might turn [my face], there too will be Death.

(SBV XI: 243–246)

During his long journey, Gilgamesh has learned the often-heavy cost of conflict. He has also explored the value of life, in light of the inevitability of death. Gilgamesh's pursuit of fame and glory through conquest leads him to loss and despair, but also forms an important part of his characterisation. At the point in the story where Gilgamesh's kingship is reaffirmed through his change of appearance and turning for home, his desire for battle and conquest becomes less prominent. In the final emphasis on home and peace, *Gilgamesh* may be compared with the *Cuthean Legend*.

The *Cuthean Legend* was widely popular in ancient Mesopotamia (Westenholz, 1997: 263). The composition is one of several legends involving the historical king, Naram-Sin, the grandson of Sargon of Akkad who ruled the Akkadian Empire from 2254–2218 BCE. In the narrative, King Naram-Sin ignores negative divinatory signals and sends thousands of warriors to their deaths on the battlefield. Naram-Sin despairs of the destruction he has caused, and leaves a cautionary note of advice for his audience at the end of the text.

Naram-Sin advises taking a firm stance, and setting aside weapons, and notes the importance of home, family, and unity. He advises self-control, moderation, and repaying wickedness from one's enemies with kindness. In the preface to his translation of the Late Assyrian Version of the *Cuthean Legend*, Foster observes that the ancient text juxtaposes the cautious approach seen in wisdom literature with a common poetic theme: the assertion that the highest duty is to "transmit knowledge and experience to the future" (2005: 348). The high status of knowledge is similarly seen in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Both compositions reflect on the wisdom of a cautious and measured approach to battle, and the destructive potential of ceaseless conflict, compared with the widespread benefits of peace.

Conclusion

Gilgamesh does not fight Utanapishtim at the end of the *Epic*, and no longer fights against death, or his responsibilities as a king. At the end of his adventures, Gilgamesh is less bellicose, and has seemingly learned that there are some battles that even quasi-divine royals with wild-man side-kicks cannot win. In this sense, the *Epic* places emphasis on the costs and benefits of battle. Rather than presenting warrior culture through an entirely positive lens, there is light and shade to the presentation of war and peace in *Gilgamesh*. The king himself demonstrates the limits of battle for achieving glory. Although Gilgamesh fights unparalleled opponents, he cannot match the achievement of Utanapishtim, whose immortality was achieved through the cultivation of divine favour. The deities themselves show mixed attitudes to war, with Ishtar's rush to crush Gilgamesh in battle resulting in defeat and despair.

Gilgamesh at times is more inclined towards using his heroic brawn in a blunt, thoughtless manner, yet ultimately he learns that there are some fights he cannot win through armed conflict. More importantly,

Gilgamesh discovers that some battles are better left uncontested. In this way, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and its muscle-bound protagonist show an intriguing proclivity towards pacifism.



Animality and ecology

Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, is the city's "wild bull" who is compared in the *Epic* to a lion, a lioness, and an eagle. At times in the narrative, he is described dressing regally, wearing a crown and royal robes, while at others he is dressed in the skin of a lion, which has the effect of obscuring his beauty. The previous two chapters of this volume explored Gilgamesh's identity through his connection to the institution of kingship, and through his heroic deeds. Yet Gilgamesh is more than a king and a hero: he is also a man, and part of the natural environment. Gilgamesh's identity as a human animal is the subject of this chapter, with the theme of animality in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* providing a lens through which to consider the hero's humanity. While exploring the role of nature in the shaping Gilgamesh's character, the broader role of ecology in narratives involving the young hero are foregrounded.

Natural forces are a constant and inescapable presence in the *Gilgamesh* narrative. The central role of ecology and animality in Gilgamesh's adventures mirrored in the hero's character. An exploration on the human condition is at the heart of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, simultaneously acting as the subject of existential exploration for the composers of the story, and for its royal protagonist. For Gilgamesh, a king who is two-thirds divine and one third human, animals provide an important counterpoint, or "other," by which to gauge the protagonist's progress. As noted by Barron, the treatment of animals in literature can be defined to an extent based on the way that the human-animal division is imagined (2002: 377), and this division is explored and at times blurred in *Gilgamesh*.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the natural world is more than a setting for the hero's adventures; the natural environment gives context to the transitions and actions of the heroes, and at times plays an active part in the narrative. The increasing supernaturalism of the environment, as Gilgamesh travels further from his home of Uruk, reflects the

extraordinary nature of his achievements. Nature and civilisation, like animality and kingship, exist in constant tension with one another in the narrative.

Nature in Mesopotamia

In a literal sense, natural forces shaped Mesopotamia, the “land between the rivers,” and the natural environment also plays a dominant role in the region’s cultural landscape. The environment was embedded in the economic, religious, and social structure of daily life, and the diversity of roles played by the natural environment is reflected in literary works.

The creative and vital force of the Euphrates was given narrative representation in the Sumerian myth of *Enki and the World Order*, where the god of wisdom is presented ejaculating into the river and filling its banks (Enki’s relationship to water is explored in Kramer and Maier, 1989). As well as creating the natural environment, Mesopotamian deities could control, alter, and enhance it, although at times this control is shown to be somewhat tenuous, an issue considered further later in this chapter.

In [Chapter 1](#), it was noted that deities were frequently identified with natural phenomena, yet the topic of religion and ecology in ancient Mesopotamia is one that is extremely nuanced. While deities were often related to and at times identified with natural forces, this should not be taken as consubstantial with a general “worship of nature” (Feldt, 2016: 376). Feldt has recently articulated the subtle involvement of religion and nature in ancient Mesopotamia:

With respect to the relations between deities and “nature” or domains of “nature” in ancient Mesopotamia, it is worth pointing out that ... even in some of the older material from ancient Mesopotamia, it is not the case that the deities represent “nature” or nature’s forces. The relation between natural domains and deities is complex and certainly such that no deity can be said to embody or epitomize a natural domain or phenomenon. To be sure, the deities may be connected to domains in nature and even command or are understood to be in charge of some of them ... but still the deities are separate from and transcend these natural domains and forces.

(Feldt, 2016: 376)

Gilgamesh is presented as shaping the natural environment through building mountain passes, cutting down forests, and digging wells. Natural forces played a crucial role in the literary presentation of the hero's life, and his death. In the *Death of Gilgamesh*, the course of the Euphrates is said to be diverted so that the hero's tomb would not be disturbed, showing the close relationship between religion, nature, and mortality in traditions surrounding Gilgamesh.

The focus on “nature” in this chapter means considering elements of the literary world of Gilgamesh which are presented in contrast with one another, such as animal and human, or urban and wilderness settings. This is not to say that in Mesopotamia, “nature” and “culture” existed in a dichotomous relationship; these elements were frequently connected to one another, with the overlapping areas providing a rich area for literary exploration. It is worth noting that the concept of “nature” has a long history in scholarly analyses, and that the “natural world” is a subjective concept, with the understanding of “nature” reliant on the current historical setting, cultural idiom, and imagination (Rochberg, 2016: 17).

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the natural environment and the urban world are related but show areas of differentiation. Uruk “the sheepfold” is home to domesticated animals, and pastoral areas close to the city were historically marked, curated, and transformed by human activities. In the wilderness, undomesticated animals and wild abundance filled the landscape (the differences between the two literary zones is elucidated in Dalley, 2016).

In this chapter, as Gilgamesh travels to the Cedar Forest, the setting of his story moves from an urban setting to the wild. Areas of wilderness provide a narrative setting which often allow Mesopotamian heroes closer access to the divine (Feldt, 2016), yet the actions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Cedar Forest carry instead the risk of divine alienation.

Gilgamesh and nature

Animality in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* can be considered as a significant theme that forms part of an overarching consideration of the natural world within the narrative. In an article on the symbolism of wrestling and the natural order in Mesopotamia, Azize has shown that ancient Mesopotamia civilisations had developed an ecological outlook, an outlook that is expressed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2002).

In this ecological outlook, the natural world was viewed as a harmonious and orderly zone, under divine care (Azize, 2002). The ecological balance could be disrupted by destructive or exploitative actions against natural resources (Azize, 2002: 22).

The natural world does more than providing a location for the hero's adventures. As Gilgamesh travels from the city to the forest and back, the changing landscape informs on the hero's inner journey. At the heart of the *Epic* is a "deep reflection" on culture and civilisation, and the differences between animals and humans, and humans and deities (Römer, 2008: 125).

Features of the natural environment are described poetically, as are the structures of the city of Uruk. Like Gilgamesh himself, the environmental landscape of the *Epic* contains natural and supernatural elements. While the story opens in the city, the action quickly moves to the wilderness at the birth of Enkidu. The initial description of Enkidu ties him closely to the natural environment and animality. He is described accompanying animals, and partaking of the natural world's resources for nourishment and clothing.

Later in the narrative, in Tablet IX, Gilgamesh goes on a long journey, beyond the Path of the Sun. He comes to a land with jewelled trees, which are described in terms of their beauty and abundance:

...The trees of the gods, he went straight (up to them),
A carnelian (tree) was in fruit,
Hung with bunches of grapes, lovely to behold.
A lapis-lazuli (tree) bore foliage,
In full fruit and gorgeous to gaze on.

(*Gilgamesh*, SBV IX: 172–176)

The supernatural quality of the trees, made from precious stones, clearly shows the "otherness" of the new environmental setting. The role of trees and the natural setting of the *Epic* in reflecting Gilgamesh's "intermediate" position between nature and divinity has been thoughtfully explored by Dickson (2007b: 205).

The trees are unlike the trees of the wilderness in their structure, but they still contain natural elements, such as the fruits and foliage. The description of these trees as being "of the gods" also communicates to the reader that Gilgamesh is getting closer to his goal of immortality, and that he is reaching beyond the conventional limits of the human condition, both geographically and esoterically. Animals encountered by Gilgamesh in his adventures also show a

mixture of natural and supernatural elements—at times, both of these qualities are embodied in a single creature, such as the Bull of Heaven, or the Scorpion People, considered further later in this chapter.



Figure 3.1 Carved limestone figure of a bull from Larsa, south of Uruk. Object dated to around 3300–3000 bce. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

Like the animals and supernatural creatures that the hero meets on his adventures, the ecological environment offers Gilgamesh obstacles and opposition. Mount Mashu, the ocean, and the Waters of Death temporarily impede Gilgamesh's access to the Flood survivor, Utanapishtim, during his quest for immortality. The challenge of scaling the mountainous terrain of the land is referenced by the hero in his self-identifying speeches, where he lists his many accomplishments.

At times, the environment itself is subject to Gilgamesh's rash actions, leading to destructive outcomes. The Cedar Forest, protected by the primary Mesopotamian deity, Enlil (or Adad, in the Old Babylonian version), is stripped of some of its timbers by Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This act of ecological violence adds to the characterisation of Gilgamesh as a leader who often overlooks the consequences of his actions.

As well as having violence acted upon it, the wilderness has the potential for delivering destruction and death. Gilgamesh's prophetic dreams in Tablet IV are accompanied by terrifying images of the power of the natural world:

The heavens cried aloud, while the earth was rumbling,
The day grew still, darkness went forth.
Lightning flashed down, fire broke out,
[flames] kept flaring up, death kept raining down.

(SBV IV: 101–104)

Images of the natural environment from Gilgamesh's dream depict a world that is unsettled and dangerous. The natural environment can change rapidly, and changes are described in almost anthropomorphic terms.

The appearance of thunder, lightning, and earthquakes are often associated with divine power in ancient Mesopotamia. Deities such as Inanna/Ishtar and Ninurta are described gathering destructive storms to conquer enemies in numerous mythic narratives (Ishtar's identity as a storm deity is considered in Pryke, 2017a: 118). The sense of unease created by the images of outbreaks of fire and thunder adds to the ominous tone of Gilgamesh's dream (although, it should be noted, Enkidu remains confident in the dream's auspicious nature). As Gilgamesh moves geographically further away from civilisation, and closer to the remote areas of the wilderness, he encounters dangerous adversaries such as lions, Humbaba and the Scorpion People.

Religion and weather: climate change

The clearest expression of the potential for danger in the natural environment is found in the telling of the Flood narrative, in Tablet XI. When Gilgamesh finally arrives at the home of Utanapishtim, the legendary Flood survivor recounts the story of the great Flood, sent by the gods to destroy humanity. The approach of the bad weather is described as “frightening to behold” and “all that was bright was turned into gloom” (SBV XI: 93, 107).

The violence of the storm is portrayed as sufficiently terrifying to frighten even the gods, who retreat up to heaven. Finally, Utanapishtim recounts the storm coming to an end. The Deluge has caused unprecedented destruction and a tragedy for humanity:

For six days and seven nights,
Was blowing the wind, the downpour, the gale, the Deluge
[laying flat the land],
When the seventh day arrived,
The gale relented, ...
The sea grew calm, that had fought like a woman in labour,
The tempest grew still, the Deluge ended.
I looked at the weather, and there was quiet,
But all the people had turned to clay.

(SBV XI: 128–135)

The destructive powers of the natural elements in the Flood narrative have a universal quality, displaying the capacity for killing humans, frightening deities, and even destroying the natural landscape. The power of the sea is described in the anthropomorphic terms of a woman in childbirth, with this imagery juxtaposing creative and destructive imagery.

Placing the story of the Flood at the climax of the *Gilgamesh* narrative reinforces the prominence and power of the natural world, with its associated animality, just prior to Gilgamesh's final embrace of his kingly, civilised role. This juxtaposition in the narrative emphasises the significance and power of Gilgamesh's transition.

Floods and droughts

It is worth noting that the Flood narrative of Tablet XI is not the only dangerous weather event in *the Epic of Gilgamesh*. The appearance of the Bull of Heaven in Tablet VI creates several adverse weather events on earth. Sink-holes open and kill hundreds of men from Uruk, and almost swallow Enkidu, who falls into a hole to waist level. The Bull's presence is accompanied by a severe drought, and in the Sumerian version of the story, this is linked to the great creature's insatiability:

At Unug, the Bull devoured the pasture, and drank the water of the river in great slurps. With each slurp it used up one mile of the river, but its thirst was not satisfied. It devoured the pasture and stripped the land bare. It broke up the palm trees of Unug, as it bent them to fit them into its mouth. When it was standing, the Bull submerged Unug.

(*Gilgameš and the Bull of Heaven*, ETCSL 1.8.1.2)

As in the Flood narrative, the destructive consequences of environmental changes are foreseen, to some degree, by the deities. Anu predicts the destructive impact of the Bull's appearance on earth, and warns that before it arrives, the widows and farmers of Uruk should be allowed to gather hay for seven years (SBV VI: 103–105).

These two extreme weather events in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* show fascinating intertextual parallels. The Flood of Tablet XI and the drought and sink-holes of Tablet VI show the devastating consequences of upsetting the balance of the earth's natural cycles—with the Flood, there is too much rain, and with the droughts, too little, and both extremes involve fatal consequences. Both weather events are caused by the dissatisfaction of deities with mortals. In the Flood, the deity who engineers the destructive storm in Tablet XI is Enlil, and in Tablet VI, the Bull is led on its rampage by Ishtar. Both deities who create the dangerous weather conditions face opposition from other deities in the pantheon, who are concerned of the potential for excessive destruction. For Ishtar, opposition is given by Anu, and Ea is foremost among the pantheon in criticising Enlil.

The chaotic weather is divinely designed, yet even the deities themselves cannot fully anticipate the consequences of upending the natural earthly balance. The Flood creates so much ruin that it alarms the deities, and for Enlil there is the unexpected outcome of having to allow the Flood survivors to attain immortality. Ishtar and Anu do not predict the death of the Bull at the hands of mortals, or the desecration of its corpse by Enkidu. Considered together, the two passages make a powerful statement about the potency of the natural world, and the primacy of environmental balance. When the natural world becomes destabilised, even the deities cannot fully predict, or prepare for, the results.

The weaponry of nature is deployed once more in Gilgamesh's battle against the forest guardian, Humbaba, in Tablet V. Destructive winds are used to overcome the hero's opponent, as will be seen later, in a further example of the divine use of natural elements to destructive effect in earthly matters.

As noted earlier, it is not only the forces of nature that are capable of destroying humans and other characters in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—the reverse is also true. Aspects of Levantine historical geography were described as having their genesis in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Suriano, 2013).

In the ancient world, the Syro-African Rift separating the Sirion and Lebanese mountains was given the geological aetiology of having been

formed during the battle between Gilgamesh and Humbaba (George, 1990). The destruction of the mountain is particularly significant considering the close association of mountains, death and deities in Mesopotamian literature.

Gilgamesh's impact on the Lebanese mountains creates yet another parallel between the young king and the deity Ishtar, who in Sumerian mythology destroys a mountain for its haughty attitude (*Inanna and Ebih*, ETCSL 1.3.2). Gilgamesh is seemingly a repeat offender when it comes to environmental destruction, as his chopping down of trees in the Cedar Forest also leads to the area's deforestation, noted later in this chapter.

The cedar forest

Despite its awesome destructive capacity, the natural world is often presented positively in the narrative of *Gilgamesh*. The environment is a source of natural resources, and frequently provides the hero with water and wood for boat-building.

The wilderness is a place of beauty and purity, as well as home to a wild abundance. The splendour and grandeur of the Cedar Forest is described poetically in Tablet V:

They (Gilgamesh and Enkidu) stood marvelling at the forest,
Observing the height of the cedars,
Observing the way into the forest ...
They were gazing at the Cedar Mountain, the dwelling of the
 gods, the throne-dais of the goddesses,
[on the] very face of the mountain the cedar was proffering its
 abundance,
Sweet was its shade, full of delight.

(SBV V: 1–8)

While the heroes temporarily pause to admire the forest's beauty, they do not appreciate it in purely aesthetic terms—Gilgamesh and Enkidu are also aware of the economic value of the cedars. The passage creates a visual portrait of the forest that reflects not only its beauty, but also the majesty and awe of the natural environment. The careful description of the Cedar Forest in Tablet V has been recognised as one of the few examples of Babylonian narrative poetry focused on providing a description of the natural world (Al-Rawi and George, 2014: 69, 74).

In addition to its aesthetic appeal, the forest is described by the feelings it inspires in those who behold it. The “shade” provided by the forest is a type of natural shelter, and this is referenced in the passage alongside the depiction of the forest as sheltering the gods, creating a sense of “home.” The contrast between Gilgamesh’s far-away home in the city of Uruk, with Humbaba’s forest home, shows that at this stage of the narrative, Gilgamesh is out of his element.

The poetic description of the Cedar Forest in the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* has recently benefited from the discovery of a new fragment of Tablet V. This discovery made international news headlines in 2015. The translations of the journey to the Cedar Forest in the Akkadian *Epic* in this chapter combine the earlier translation of George (2003) with the new fragment’s translation from 2015.

The discovery of the fragment occurred as the world became sensitised to the destruction of Mesopotamian antiquities in Iraq in the same year, with the *Washington Post* juxtaposing the “heart-warming story” of the find against the destruction and looting in Syria and Iraq (Tharoor, 2015). The find follows the observed trend of newly discovered fragments primarily filling the lacunae of known literary works from the ancient Mesopotamian oeuvre (Al-Rawi and George, 1990).

The ecological aspects of the fragment of Tablet V, considered here, have formed part of the story of the discovery, as these aspects provide a lens through which modern audiences, with present day concerns over climate change, can relate to the appreciation of the wilderness seen in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. While it is certainly anachronistic to project current environmental concerns onto ancient Mesopotamia—thousands of years prior to the industrial revolution—it remains a worthwhile endeavour to consider the relationship between humanity, animality, and the wilderness, across a broad range of culturally and temporally based settings.

Epic deforestation

Despite the pre-industrial setting of the *Epic*, environmental changes resulting from the harvesting of natural resources by humans was a consideration even before Gilgamesh’s time. In North-west Syria, recent research has shown anthropogenic deforestation beginning around 9000 BCE (Yasuda, Kitagawa, and Nakagawa, 2000). The clearance of the cedar forests of Lebanon began around 7700 BCE and forests in some areas of the region had almost disappeared by the time

of the composition of Sumerian narratives involving Gilgamesh. The clearance of cedar forests in Lebanon seems to have resulted in soil erosion and climate change (Yasuda et al., 2000). In the summary of their findings, the authors of the study note that the historical clearance of forests would have been likely to have influenced the composers of the Gilgamesh narratives, in their choice of deforestation as a topic in the hero's quest:

(The ancient composers) were already aware of the importance of forest resources for the development of civilisations, especially in southern Mesopotamia, which is located in a scantily wooded area. It seems possible that these writers had already experienced or heard of nature's cruel reaction to forest destruction. The writers chose the forest clearance as their main subject because they regarded the forest as an important resource which affects the fate of the city-kingdom.

(Yasuda et al., 2000: 135)

The historicity of forest clearance in the region of *Gilgamesh's* setting, and the negative environmental consequences of this deforestation, fit with the complex presentation of the Cedar Forest's destruction and the killing of its guardian in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The beauty and majesty of the forest is presented in the *Epic* in a nuanced manner, showing a sophisticated awareness of the many costs involved in harnessing the material resources of the forest.

In the recovered fragment of Tablet V, transliterated and translated by Al-Rawi and George, several lines of tablet detail Gilgamesh and Enkidu's entry to the Cedar Forest. It is worth noting that this moment of arrival into the forest has been the subject of a great deal of foreshadowing in the narrative, as has the heroes' eventual meeting with Humbaba. The first physical meeting of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, a highly significant moment in Tablet II, was also heavily foreshadowed, an aspect of the narrative considered in more detail in [Chapter 4](#). By the time Gilgamesh and Enkidu reach the Cedar Forest, they have received numerous sinister warnings about it from credible sources, experienced prophetic dreams about their future encounters there, and travelled an extraordinary distance.

The suspenseful build-up to the entry to the Forest, and the encounter with Humbaba, creates a climatic sense to the scene. Yet, upon finally arriving at the entrance to Humbaba's home, the heroes do not charge directly into battle. Instead, they pause to reflect on the

majestic quality of the forest. The grandeur, beauty, and marvellous quality of the forest are particularly emphasised by the newly discovered lines:

[All] tangled was the thorny undergrowth, the forest a thick canopy...

For one league on all sides cedars [sent forth] saplings, cypresses [...] for two-thirds of a league.

The cedar was scabbed with lumps (of resin) [for] sixty (cubits') height,

resin [oozed] forth, drizzling down like rain,

[flowing freely(?)] for ravines to bear away.

(SBV V: 10–16)

Despite the recognition of the uniqueness of this passage in modern scholarship, the description of the cedars in Tablet V can be compared with the composer's admiration of the jewelled trees of Tablet IX, which has been quoted earlier.

A forest home

The description of the jewelled trees in the land beyond the Path of the Sun echoes the description of the Cedar Forest in Tablet V. Both forests are entered just prior to a much-anticipated meeting with an important figure who has supernatural qualities (Humbaba and Utanapishtim). Both forests contain rare, luxurious elements, which are themselves beautiful, but also known for their lucrative economic value. Both forests bring delight to the beholder with their aesthetic beauty, and are described as abundantly bountiful. The juxtaposition of the two forests in the texts builds the tension in the narrative for Gilgamesh's encounter with Utanapishtim, perhaps preparing the audience to anticipate further violent conflict.

Returning to the Cedar Forest, the description of resin richly flowing from the cedar and cypress trees gives the forest setting more than a purely visual description. The scent of the trees that would accompany the oozing resin adds a further layer of detail to the scene, increasing the sensory impact. Cedar incense was an exotic luxury product in the Ancient Near East, and incense was used to make fragrant offerings to Mesopotamian deities. The scented offerings of incense were valuable to deities, and had a soothing and appeasing effect on divine moods.

The religious value of incense offerings is intertextually emphasised

in the *Epic*, particularly in terms of its use in appeasing the gods and gaining divine favour. Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, offers an incense offering to Shamash on a rooftop in Tablet III. In this section of the *Epic*, Ninsun is petitioning Shamash and his wife, Aya, to protect Gilgamesh on his dangerous journey to the Cedar Forest. The importance of incense offerings is further foregrounded in Tablet XI, where Utanapishtim uses an offering to appease the deities following the catastrophic Flood:

I brought out an offering and sacrificed to the four corners of the
earth,
I strewed incense on the peak of the mountain.
Seven flasks and seven I set in position,
Below them I heaped up (sweet) reed, cedar and myrtle.
The gods smelled the savour,
The gods smelled the sweet savour,
The gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.
(SBV XI: 157–163)

In this scene, the mother goddess Belit-ili instructs all the deities to come to enjoy the incense, except for Enlil, who is excluded due to his role in destroying humanity (SBV XI: 166–171).

It has been noted that the appearance of luxury items, such as aromatic sap, gives the setting a courtly feel (Al-Rawi and George, 2014: 74). The atmosphere of the forest then reflects on the character of Humbaba, who “emerges not as a barbarian ogre but as a foreign ruler entertained with music at court in the manner of Babylonian kings, but music of a more exotic kind, played by a band of equally exotic musicians” (Al-Rawi and George, 2014: 74). As well as giving the forest a luxurious and royal atmosphere, the setting of the scene with its layers of sensory information for the audience also imbues the setting of the forest with a sense of religiosity; the Forest is described in a manner that suggests a sacred space.

As well as describing the appearance, feeling and scent of the forest, several lines of the recovered fragment are devoted to capturing the sounds of the forest:

[Through] all the forest a bird began to sing:
[...] were answering one another, a constant din was the noise,
[A solitary(?)] tree-cricket set off a noisy chorus,
[...] were singing a song, making the ... pipe loud.

A wood pigeon was moaning, a turtle dove calling in answer.

[At the call of] the stork, the forest exults,

[at the cry of] the francolin, the forest exults in plenty.

[Monkey mothers] sing aloud, a youngster monkey shrieks:

[like a band(?)] of musicians and drummers(?),

daily they bash out a rhythm in the presence of Humbaba.

(SBV V: 17–26)

The playing of music further strengthens the sense of a sacred environment, as descriptions of musical performance are frequently found in the written depiction of religious events. The singing of animals and birds is described anthropomorphically, as is the imagery of the animals playing impromptu wind and percussion instruments.

While adding further sensory layers to the description of the forest, the music, and creature-musicians, set a joyful tone to the forest scene, and one of great abundance. The forest, and its community, “exults” at the noise of the creatures, and the imagery of singing monkey mothers accompanied by their offspring strengthens the sense of family, home, and community in the remote forest. The imagery of the scene is not unique to *Gilgamesh*, with depictions of monkeys playing musical instruments appearing in Near Eastern iconography from a range of periods, including images of monkey mothers accompanied (musically and physically) by their babies (Spycket, 1998: 5).

The impression of the animals is striking in how each creature is presented individually, yet part of a collective community performance. The bird that begins to sing (SBV V: 17) draws a response, which sets off a melodic chain. This amplification is repeated with the appearance of a “solitary cricket” that inspires a “noisy chorus.” The creatures communicate with one another, and fill the air with an exuberant cacophony in the style of call-and-response.

By presenting the development of the “performance” from single birds and crickets to a full-scale forest symphony, the Cedar Forest is given space in the narrative to “react” to the arrival of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. A silence seems to have fallen over the jungle at their arrival, which is slowly eased by the seeming resumption of animal noises and bird calls. This move from silence to noise subtly illustrates the intrusion of the two heroes into this exotic space, and exposes their status as outsiders.

The connection between the remote forest and the divine realm is emphasised by the description of the mountain as the home of the

deities, and this link is strengthened by the divine provision of a guardian to protect the forest, in the form of Humbaba. The forest and Humbaba show some literary parallels, with both presented in a complex manner that juxtaposes their useful and innate qualities. There is a “deliberate ambivalence” to Humbaba’s role (Azize, 2002: 4). He is a monster, but employed in the service of the deities, and the forest is pristinely beautiful, but its timbers are valuable (Azize, 2002: 4).

Humbaba

Humbaba’s role as a guardian extended beyond the limits of *Gilgamesh*. Plaque figures showing Humbaba’s head were affixed to doorways of buildings, such as the temple at Tell al Rimah (Braun-Holzinger, 1999), to protect the inhabitants (Assante, 2001: 28). This practice perhaps reflects some aetiological cross-over with *Gilgamesh*’s eventual hanging of Humbaba’s head on the doors of Enlil’s temple at Nippur.

Humbaba’s origins are thought to relate to the apotropaic use of his image: he was pictured as a grinning head attached to a doorway to repel evil (Wiggermann, 1992: 150). Wiggermann suggests that Humbaba’s Sumerian name, *Huwawa*, may be related to the noise he was thought to make while grinning—*huwawa!*—in what could be a possible early example of the famous modern trope of the laughing supervillain (1992: 150).

The conflict with Humbaba

Although natural forces such as wind and rain are presented in the narrative as capable of causing devastation, these same elements may also provide *Gilgamesh* with assistance. The complexity of the presentation of the natural world is seen in the Cedar Forest, where the solar deity Shamash sends an assortment of powerful winds to help *Gilgamesh* to subdue Humbaba (Maier, 1997a: 295):

White cloud was turned to black,
Death raining down upon them like a mist.
Šamaš roused against Humbaba the mighty storm winds:
South Wind, North Wind, East Wind, West Wind, Blast,

Counterblast, Gale, Tempest, Typhoon,
Hell-wind, Icy Blast, Hurricane, Tornado.

Thirteen winds rose up and the face of H̱umbaba darkened—
He cannot charge forwards, he cannot kick backwards—
And then the weapons of Gilgameš did catch H̱umbaba.

(SBV V: 135–143)



Figure 3.2Plaque of Humbaba. Fired clay mask of Humbaba from Sippar, the cult centre of Shamash. A five-line inscription on the back records the omen of diviner Warad-Marduk. The object is dated to around 1800–1600 bce. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

The winds sent by Shamash play a decisive role in the combat; only through the divine manipulation of the natural elements can the forest guardian be overcome. The force of the winds paralyses Humbaba, preventing him from either attacking or escaping in the face of the young heroes. Humbaba himself is famed for his ability to elicit a terrifying bellow that causes his opponents to freeze, adding irony to his presentation.

There is further sad irony with the scene of the natural environment being harnessed to overcome a guardian of the

wilderness, as well as with Humbaba's falling victim to incapacitation. Adding to the complexity of the scene is the presence of Utu (Sumerian Shamash) as the protector of both Gilgamesh and Humbaba in the Sumerian version of the story of the heroes' journey to the Cedar Forest (Sonik, 2012: 389).

The destruction of the forest

In the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic*, the scene involving the felling of the forest is quite fragmented. After a break in the text, the two heroes are described working together to clear the forest, with Gilgamesh cutting down the trees, and Enkidu finding the pick of the timber (SBV V: 291). Enkidu describes having cut down a lofty cedar so tall that its branches "abutted the heavens" (SBV V: 293–294). With some of the timber they have harvested, the two heroes craft a giant wooden door for the Temple of Enlil at Nippur. The implication of the door-building is that its builders hope to appease the god's anger for the killing of the guardian and destruction of the forest (George, 2003: 470).

Remoteness in *Gilgamesh*

Although the remote regions of the wilderness offer danger, they are also home to valuable and at times, magical rewards. As discussed earlier, the land of jewelled trees is located at the edge of the world, and the trees are described as laden with precious stones where Gilgamesh expects to find fruit, thorns and leaves (SBV IX: 173–194).

Also found in a remote area is the *amurdinnu* ("heart-beat") plant. This prickly herb is recommended to Gilgamesh by Utanapishtim, for its potential for providing a means to rejuvenation and renewed vitality. To access the *amurdinnu* plant, Gilgamesh opens a channel in the land beyond the Path of the Sun, and dives down deeply into the subterranean Apsu. Similarly to other natural locations in *Gilgamesh*, the Apsu contains a mixture of cosmological and more overtly geographical elements (discussed in detail in Horowitz, 1998: 306–317). It is also the name of Tiamat's primordial consort in *Enuma Elish*. The watery area of the Apsu is the home of Ea, and Gilgamesh needs to tie heavy stones to his legs to weigh himself down to reach the plant.

The difficulty in accessing the *amurdinnu* plant is further

emphasised by Gilgamesh's later acknowledgment that he cannot repeat the way he recovered it, after the plant is stolen from him by a snake. The creature that robs Gilgamesh of eternal youth is known for its liminal quality in Mesopotamian literature. Ophiomancy (the practice of divining through snake omens) was second only to ornithomancy (the practice of divining through bird omens) in terms of its cataloguing records that have survived from ancient times (Smith, 2015: 41).

Smith's recent analysis (2015) of the relation of ophiomancy to the biblical snake of Genesis has intriguing implications for the seizure of the *amurdinnu* plant by the snake in *Gilgamesh*. Although scholars have argued for an aetiological purpose to this story, explaining how the snake first developed the ability to shed its skin, the presence of the snake may have been intended to provide the hero with an omen.

The supernatural qualities of the furthest reaches of the wilderness, considered in connection with its magical inhabitants and vegetation, seem to poetically symbolise the approaching boundary between the human and divine realms. This supernaturalism is a function of distance as well as the nature of the terrain. Utanapishtim's telling of the Flood narrative occurs geographically at the furthest reach of Gilgamesh's travels, and this story elucidates in powerful terms the limits between the human and divine realms, as well as foregrounding the destructive potential of the natural environment. The concept of the geographical remoteness of a magical item is also seen in the *Legend of Etana*. In this Babylonian narrative, the legendary king, Etana, goes on a search for a magical plant that will assist him to conceive an heir. In this story, the link between supernatural plants and the divine is overt—the plant is found in the heavens.

The supernatural quality of the remote natural world seems not to be shared by the areas of the natural environment closer to civilisation. The forest that is home to Enkidu and the trapper seems to be a less fantastical place, and while it is full of natural bounty, there are fewer references to other-worldly features.

The Bull of Heaven: heroic animal meets animalistic hero

Considering how concepts of animality inform on Gilgamesh and his journey necessitates first exploring the manner in which animals are portrayed in the text more generally, to provide context for the

analysis. Animal actors in the *Epic* are portrayed with a mixture of natural realism and supernaturalism; for example, the Bull of Heaven, part bovine quadruped, part cosmic warrior, inhabits a space somewhere between the two extremes.

The Bull's ability to transgress the boundaries between the earthly realm and the divine makes the beast the perfect foil for the legendary king of Uruk. The parallels drawn in the narrative between Bull and hero are emphasised by the at times clumsy manner in which the Bull attempts to fit within the limits of the human world—due to its heavenly origins, the creature's very presence on earth is destructive. Similarly, Gilgamesh's liminal status, as one inhabiting a space midway between animal and deity (Dickson, 2007a: 176), contributes to his own unlimited potential for conflict, and his destructive conduct.

The Bull of Heaven's appearance on earth also highlights the potential for disaster which may occur when remote, supernatural creatures are brought close to areas of civilisation. The Bull's presence is destructive, and brings imbalance to the natural and civilised realms of Uruk:

When (the Bull) reached the [land] of Uruk,
It dried up the woodland, the marshland and the reeds,
It went down to the river, (the level of) the river was reduced by
seven cubits.
At the snort of the Bull of Heaven a pit opened up,
A hundred men of Uruk all fell into it.

(SBV VI: 116–120)

Once the Bull has been killed, its remains are brought into the city, where craftspeople of Uruk admire the economic value of the Bull's great horns:

Gilgameš summoned the craftsmen, all the smiths,
For the craftsmen to praise the thickness of its horns.
Thirty minas of lapis lazuli each was their mass,
Two minas each their rims,
Six kor of oil was the capacity of both.

(SBV VI: 160–164)

The religious value of the Bull continues in death, although the focus is on the creature's body (Pryke, 2017b). The heart of the creature is offered to Shamash, Ishtar establishes mourning rites over

its haunch, and Gilgamesh dedicates the horns to Lugalbanda “his god” (SBV VI: 165).

Animals in *Gilgamesh*

Animals in Ancient Near Eastern thought and culture held a diversity of roles in relationship to humans—as predator and prey, sources of raw material and transport, and as valuable symbolic referents (Arbuckle, 2012: 201). The animals of *Gilgamesh* reflect this real-life diversification, by playing a multitude of parts (Pryke, 2017b). The role of animals in *Gilgamesh* is a theme which has a substantial part in illuminating the centremost issues of the *Epic*.

Animality is one of the most significant themes of *Gilgamesh*. In considering the depiction of animals in *Gilgamesh*, we gain insight into how animality was perceived in the time of the *Epic*’s composition, and into the thematic crossover between humanity and animality in the text. Across a variety of ancient cultures, the conceptualisation of animal by a society is indelibly linked to cultural perceptions of the status of humanity in the environment (Peperstraete, 2016: 13).

The theme of animality is not confined to non-human actors in the narrative; human actors at times are given animal qualities by the *Epic*’s composers, and animals are sometimes portrayed in terms that make them appear human. The use of animals provides a contrast with human characters, but also assists in the articulation of the boundary between mortals and immortals, and between the natural and the supernatural—contrasts at the heart of both the *Epic* and its protagonist.

The human/animal boundary is one that is explored and often transgressed as part of the complicated journey of the legendary King of Uruk (Pryke, 2017b). The line separating the two worlds displays remarkable permeability, and the two heroes of the narrative, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, display a mixture of animal and human behaviours at different stages of their adventures. The tension between animality and humanity in the depiction of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is considered in [Chapter 5](#), with the contrast of wisdom and wildness.

Composite creations: Scorpion People, the Jewelled
Forest, and the Stone Ones

As noted earlier, Gilgamesh's liminal nature is reflected in the ecology of the *Epic*. The combination of natural and supernatural elements creates a distinctive environment in the Jewelled Forest, also seen in the Waters of Death. While the fantastical elements of these distant places "stretch the limits of modern credulity," Horowitz notes that parallels may be found in later literary traditions (1998: 106). Horowitz also notes the limitless potential of the natural world for the provision of inexplicable wonders and surprising phenomena (1998: 106).

The quality of extreme ecological hybridity, seen in the *Epic's* natural environment, is also found in some the *Epic's* many creatures. The Scorpion People and the Stone Ones both mix normal elements of the natural world with paranormal ones, and the same can be said for the Bull of Heaven. The impact of these powerful composite beings on the meaning of the narratives of Near Eastern literature has been well expressed by Collins:

When naturally occurring animals were inadequate to express a concept or evoke an emotional response, it was necessary to invent ones that could. Fantastic creatures blended human and animal elements in a terrifying manifestation of the uncontrolled "other." They existed in the dream world, inhabited the dark recesses of the underworld, or, like the Scorpion-people in the story of Gilgamesh, hovered at the edges of civilization.

(Collins, 2002: xxi)

The presence of these creatures makes the conceptual tension between animals and humans universal. Navigating the boundaries between human, animal and deity is not purely a concern for the hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but for the story's ecology, and its other characters, such as Enkidu.

Scorpion People

Scorpion People appear in Tablet IX of *Gilgamesh*. They are hybridised creatures who also appear outside the *Epic* in Mesopotamian art and literature. The creatures' upper bodies are human in form, and they are bearded. Their lower bodies have the tail of a scorpion, hind-quarters and talons of a bird, and a serpent-headed penis. At times Scorpion People are presented with wings; it is thought that the reptilian and bird-like features are a later addition. The Scorpion People are closely connected to Shamash, the solar deity (Sumerian

Utu). In the role of Shamash's attendants, the Scorpion People are often depicted in art standing below and supporting a winged solar disc (Pryke, 2016b).

The origins of the Scorpion People are relayed in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*. They are one of eleven monster warriors created by the personification of the primordial ocean, Tiamat, in her battle to avenge the death of the god of freshwater, Apsu. The creation of the Scorpion People is listed in Tablet I of the *Epic*, listed along with Tiamat's other monstrous creations. In the myth, Tiamat is defeated by Marduk, who becomes the king of the Babylonian gods. The Scorpion People and other creatures created by Tiamat are also subdued and domesticated, and they become benevolent forces, obligated to help humans and gods (Nys, 2012). The Scorpion People work as guardians in the service of Shamash, and this protective function is also a feature of their artistic use.

The image of a male and female pair of Scorpion People on figurines was thought to have an apotropaic effect. While the depiction of Scorpion People shows some variation in different chronological periods of Mesopotamian history, what remains constant in their representation is their depiction as benevolent helpers of the gods (Nys, 2012).

The Scorpion People are presented as liminal creatures in *Gilgamesh*. As well as inhabiting a space between human and animal, their role in the narrative is to guard the tunnel linking the sun, earth and sky. The use of these hybrid creatures in the *Epic* shows intriguing dualism. The Scorpion People are dangerous; with their death-striking glare, they cause even heroic Gilgamesh to momentarily cover his eyes (Gilgamesh IX: 46). At the same time, the creatures are important custodians who are shown to be able to employ some autonomy and wisdom in their role as attendants of Shamash. Despite their divine directive to protect the Path of the Sun, the Scorpion People recognise Gilgamesh's distinctiveness, and are seemingly persuaded by his story.

The Jewelled Forest

Once Gilgamesh travels through the Path of the Sun, he arrives in a forest of jewelled trees. As noted earlier in this chapter, the scene of Gilgamesh's arrival in the Jewelled Forest mirrors his arrival with Enkidu into the Cedar Forest (for the use of mirroring in the structure of Akkadian narrative literature, see Helle, forthcoming). In both scenes, the sensory richness of the forest is foregrounded:

A carnelian (tree) was in fruit,
Hung with bunches of grapes, lovely to behold.
A lapis lazuli (tree) bore foliage,
In full fruit and gorgeous to gaze on.

(SBV IX: 173–176)

Gilgamesh is shown to enjoy the esoteric qualities of his unusual natural surrounds; he approaches the trees immediately, and reaches out to touch the glittering harvest. The bounty of the forest presents a natural abundance that juxtaposes natural and supernatural elements.

As in the Cedar Forest, the trees offer a combination of economic and aesthetic values. The precious fruit, hanging from the branches, is more accessible than the valuable cedars of Humbaba's forest, and yet the young hero's response to the Jewelled Forest reflects a significant change in his characterisation. Instead of plundering the riches of the jewelled trees, Gilgamesh pauses to admire them (although the passage is fragmented), and then continues on his journey.

The juxtaposition of the two forest scenes, noted for their numerous similarities earlier, gives an insight into Gilgamesh's character arc. Where once he sought riches and material gain, by Tablet IX, his focus has shifted to acquiring more esoteric rewards, such as immortality. Gilgamesh has learned that great success and the acquisition of goods cannot defend against the human condition.

The Stone Ones

Gilgamesh's communication with the Scorpion People results in the continuation of his journey to reach the Jewelled Forest, yet his quest is almost brought to an end through conflict with more hybrid creatures: the Stone Ones. Gilgamesh first hears about the Stone Ones from Siduri, who informs the young king that the Stone Ones accompany the boatman, Ur-Shanabi, while he strips a cedar in the forest (SBV X: 87–88).

Gilgamesh's prior expertise in the cutting of cedars comes to further use after he destroys the Stone Ones during a brief battle-scene in Tablet X. By name alone, the Stone Ones would seem to be tough opponents, and this impression is enhanced through the noting of their fearlessness in the text.

And the Stone Ones would seal the boat,
Who did not fear the Waters of Death.

(SBV X: 102–103)

George has identified the Stone Ones as sailors who work as crew for Ur-Shanabi (2003: 501–502. For other suggestions as to the Stone Ones’ nature, see Kilmer, 1996). The natural features of the apparently supernatural stone beings are employed strategically against them by Gilgamesh—though the text is fragmentary, he is described as smashing them, and dropping them into water (SBV X: 106). Both lines of attack are well-suited to an opponent made of rock, and show a change in tactic from Gilgamesh’s previous assaults on Enkidu, Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, and the lions. In previous fights, Gilgamesh relied on his strength and his sword during conflict, but the distinctive qualities of the Stone Ones provide the opportunity to show the king’s ingenuity and flexibility during battle.

Enkidu

Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s companion who is created in the wild, provides a constant contrast to the hero and his progress throughout the king’s adventures. Enkidu’s name is thought to mean “lord (of) the pleasant place” (George, 2003: 139), and in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is spelled with the divine determinative, as is the name of his royal companion (see Keetman, 2015, for discussion on the origins and use of the divine determinative in Enkidu’s name).

Enkidu’s name evokes his wild homeland; his early life consists of running wild with animals in the forest:

In the wild (Aruru) created Enkidu, the hero ...
he knows not at all a people nor even a country ...

feeding on grass with the very gazelles.
Jostling at the water-hole with the herd,
He enjoyed the water with the animals.

(SBV I: 103–112)

George notes that the reference in line 108 of Tablet I to Enkidu’s lack of a “people” may indeed refer to his lack of a “family” (2003: 545), a continuing theme of Enkidu’s characterisation.

Enkidu’s home in the wilderness, his hairy body, innocence and choice of food make him a more overtly animalistic character than Gilgamesh at the start of the *Epic* (Hentsch, 2002). Even at the outset of the narrative, however, Enkidu is not presented as an “ordinary” animal.



Figure 3.3 Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven. Pale white-blue chalcedony cylinder seal; Gilgamesh, on the left, and his friend Enkidu, on the right, kill the Bull of Heaven while Ishtar tries to prevent them. Line drawing by Kerry Pryke.

Although Enkidu is shown to hold several traits in common with animals, he is also depicted as a kind of guardian for his fellow wild creatures; while he is like them in some behaviours and appearance, he is still distinct from other animals due to his capacity to provide them with protection from human-made traps—an ability resulting from his own human intelligence and dexterity.

Enkidu's role in defending animals from hunters is noted by the trapper who first encounters him in the wild, and makes Gilgamesh aware of the wild man's existence:

He (Enkidu) has filled in the pits that I dug,
 he has uprooted my snares [that I laid.]
 He has released from my grasp the herds, the animals [of the]
 wild...

(SBV I: 157–159)

Enkidu remains closely associated with animals and the animal world, even after his civilisation, but his connection to animals becomes much less harmonious, and even antagonistic. The presence in the text of a human character with an animalistic background gives the audience a sense of what animality means for human characters, and further, what it means to be less like an animal.

Although the animal state is presented in contrast with civilisation, animality is not, generally speaking, presented negatively in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Some animals are shown as powerful creatures, capable of anthropomorphic emotions and performing important functions in the narrative.

Adoption and animality

Despite the often positive presentation of animals in *Gilgamesh*, the depiction of animality in the *Epic* is complicated, and not all animals are described in a flattering light. This is seen in Humbaba's descriptive analogy of Tablet V. In Tablet V of the Standard Babylonian Version, Humbaba, captured by Enkidu and Gilgamesh, gives a speech where he gives a harsh polemic about Enkidu. Humbaba expresses the wish that he would like to have killed his adversary earlier when the opportunity presented itself, and seems to compare Enkidu to a terrapin and a turtle, as well as the spawn of a fish (*Gilgamesh* SBV V: 87–88). Although sufficient context for Mesopotamian views about turtles is somewhat lacking, the context of the speech indicates the animal analogies used by Humbaba are, to say the least, uncomplimentary.

At the end of his speech, Humbaba adds the comment that Enkidu, like the spawn of a fish, did not know his father, and like the two reptiles, he did not suckle his mother's milk. These comments reflect the biological reality of reptiles as egg-laying animals, contrasted against the nursing habits of mammals, including humans. With the use of the fish and reptile imagery, Humbaba is making a contrast of Enkidu with Gilgamesh, who it is frequently noted in the text was suckled by his divine mother, Ninsun. At the same time, he is undermining Enkidu's humanity.

Humbaba's comments directly correspond to Enkidu's somewhat unusual genesis from clay, as well as to his social status as an orphan. To put it bluntly, Humbaba is calling Enkidu a bastard, and while his words are (somewhat strangely) successful in evoking pity for his cause in *Gilgamesh*, the speech only further angers Enkidu.

The parentless status of Enkidu is a serious concern in the text. At this point in the narrative, it has recently been the focus of an attempt by Ninsun to provide Enkidu with a type of family (seen in Tablet III). As Wassermann notes in his analysis of Enkidu's origins, Enkidu is deeply aware of the unusual circumstances surrounding his origins,

and his desire for a family is one of the most notable aspects of his characterisation, as well as an important driver of the narrative (2005). Enkidu's lack of family is further the focus of a curse made against him by Humbaba prior to his death:

Apart from his friend Gilgameš, may Enkidu have nobody to
bury him!

(SBV V: 257)

Like Enkidu, Humbaba is an orphan; in the Sumerian version of the episode, he says that his mother was a cave in the mountains, and his father was a cave in the hills:

Huwawa replied to him: 'The mother who bore me was a cave in the mountains. The father who engendered me was a cave in the hills. Utu left me to live all alone in the mountains!'

(*Gilgameš and Huwawa* B, ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1)

While disclosing his status as an orphan, Humbaba seems to claim that he should be under the protection of the sun deity, Shamash. The divine protection of orphans was also observed earlier in the narrative during the adoption episode of Tablet III. The portrayal of orphans in the text, using animal metaphors, suggests that, despite Ninsun's efforts to adopt Enkidu, a social stigma may have continued in Mesopotamian society for illegitimate children.

Enkidu provides a comparison for Gilgamesh in several literary compositions; at times, Enkidu seems to function in the narrative as a "mirror" for the mighty hero of Uruk. The move from animality to civilisation and humanity, experienced by Enkidu in Tablet I of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is "mirrored" by Gilgamesh in the second half of the *Epic*, although in this case, the process is reversed. The negative impact of Enkidu's transformation from a wild state to a more civilised one is considered in a later chapter, but it is clear that Gilgamesh's transformation is also a costly one. Seemingly, any movement along the spectrum between humanity, divinity and animality cannot be undertaken lightly in the world of *Gilgamesh*.

Animality and mourning

Animality is associated with vitality and passion in the narrative. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are both described as "wild bulls," and

Gilgamesh's deep grieving for his lost friend is expressed in animal terms.

In Tablet VIII, Gilgamesh moves swiftly from more civilised, human comportment to an animal-like state. While Gilgamesh himself can be viewed as the cause (or one of the causes) for Enkidu's changed state from wild-man to heroic companion, the catalyst for Gilgamesh's change is Enkidu.

Following a dream where he observes the deities deciding his fate, Enkidu falls ill at the end of Tablet VII. The illness lasts for several days, before Enkidu finally succumbs. Following Enkidu's death, the emotional intensity of Gilgamesh's grief for Enkidu exposes his most basic, animalistic side, creating a contrast with the *Epic's* themes of humanity and kingship. As with Enkidu earlier in the *Epic*, the movement along the spectrum of humanity and animality is presented alongside animal imagery, and involves loss.

As well as transforming Gilgamesh into a more animalistic form of himself, Enkidu's loss leads to a period of mourning. The death of the young warrior, Enkidu, can be compared with the death of the cosmic warrior, the Bull of Heaven, in Tablet VI. Both events inspire mourning, involving the community, yet the mourning is presented differently, and involves diverse sections of society. In Tablet VI, the goddess Ishtar and the women of Uruk assemble around the dismembered haunch of the Bull of Heaven, and lament over it:

Ištar assembled the courtesans, prostitutes and harlots,
She instituted mourning over the Bull of Heaven's haunch.

(SBV VI: 158–159)

While Ishtar and the women mourn, Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the guests at his palace celebrate (SBV VI: 160–179).

The mourning for Enkidu is presented in much greater detail and scale in the narrative than the mourning for the Bull. Gilgamesh gives a long speech committing himself to mourning, and alongside him, the elders of the city, and the inhabitants of the city. In an interesting parallel to the Bull's female mourners, Gilgamesh promises to mourn his friend's death using feminine imagery:

I shall mourn Enkidu, my friend,
like a professional mourning woman I shall lament bitterly.

(SBV VIII: 44–45)

In the mourning for Enkidu of Tablet VIII of the epic, Enkidu's

status as an orphan is again featured prominently. Gilgamesh's long speech of eulogy begins with a statement of Enkidu's unusual origins, and his close ties to the wilderness:

O Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle,
And your father, a wild donkey [created],
Whom the wild [asses] reared with their milk,
And the animals [of the wild taught] all the pastures!

(SBV XIII: 3–6)

Gilgamesh then gives the command for mourning to begin for his friend. While Shamash predicted that Gilgamesh would make the people of Uruk lament Enkidu's death in Tablet VII, Gilgamesh's commands for mourning have a wider scope than the inhabitants of the city. There is a universality to the mourning that Gilgamesh demands.

The directive from Gilgamesh presents a union of the inhabitants of the natural and civilised worlds. Gilgamesh instructs many categories of people to mourn, including the young men, the shepherds, the ploughmen, the brewers and the elders of the city. This scene gives an interesting contrast to the king's tyrannical divisiveness from Tablet I, explored in [Chapter 1](#).

Gilgamesh also instructs various types of animals to lament over the loss of Enkidu, specifically listing the bear, the hyena, the panther, cheetah, stag, jackal, lion, wild bull, deer, ibex alongside all the herds and animals of the wild. Even the natural environment and the city are joined in grief for the fallen hero:

May the paths, O Enkidu, [of] the Cedar Forest
[mourn] you ...
May the high [peaks] of the hills and mountains mourn you ...
May the pastures lament like your mother!
May [boxwood], cypress and cedar mourn you,
Through whose midst we crept in our fury! ...
May the sacred River Ulāy mourn you, along whose banks we
would walk so lustily!
May the holy Euphrates mourn you,
Which [we used] to pour in libation (as) water from skins!

(SBV VIII: 7–20)

The unity of contrasting environments and characters powerfully expresses the momentous impact of Enkidu's death, and the

overwhelming nature of grief. The scene also shows Gilgamesh's awareness of the power of communal unity, a useful quality for a king and lacking from his identity earlier in the narrative.

As well as uniting the natural environment, the people of Uruk and the animals in grief for his lost friend, Gilgamesh undertakes a variety of sacrificial duties, and petitions many deities to care for his lost friend. The orderly religious and communal aspects of Gilgamesh's grief are juxtaposed against the more passionate and animalistic expressions of his personal mourning.

After the death of his companion Enkidu, Gilgamesh is described in the text as circling his dead friend like an eagle, and like a lioness deprived of her cubs:

(Gilgamesh) felt (Enkidu's) heart, but it was not beating any more.

He covered (his) friend, (veiling) his face like a bride,

Circling around him like an eagle.

Like a lioness who is deprived of her cubs,

He kept turning about, this way and that.

He was pulling out his curly [tresses] and letting them fall in a heap,

Tearing off his finery and casting it away, [...like] something taboo.

(SBV VIII: 58–64)

These metaphors in Tablet VIII are important for understanding the theme of animality in the *Epic* more broadly. In the metaphors, it is possible to see how the boundary between humanity and animality has been blurred by the ancient composers. Gilgamesh, a semi-divine man, is described in animal terms at a critical juncture in his life. By being described as similar to an eagle or a lion, the rawness and purity of his grief is clearly expressed. Similarly, by equating the grieving humanity of Gilgamesh with the bereft animality of the lioness, the ancient authors show an almost anthropomorphic empathy with the mother lion—as Gilgamesh grieves for his friend, so the mother lion must mourn her separation from her cubs (Pryke, 2017b).

The use of the imagery of the lion and the eagle occurs at the heart of the description of Gilgamesh's grieving in Tablet VIII, and is among several lines which function as the climax of Gilgamesh's personal expression of grief. In the preceding lines, from 1–40, Gilgamesh gives a speech to his late friend, instructing all the people, animals and land

to mourn. There are references to the close relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in this section:

May the young men of Uruk-the-Sheepfold mourn you,
[who] watched our battle, as we slew the Bull of Heaven!

(SBV VIII: 21–22)

The focus of the passage becomes more private and personal at line 41, where Gilgamesh, after listing all who will mourn Enkidu, declares he shall mourn Enkidu himself. From lines 41–64, Gilgamesh’s personal loss is most clearly expressed, and the private and personal aspects of his grief are reflected in his access to Enkidu’s body.

These lines are part of a very moving scene where Gilgamesh feels for Enkidu’s heartbeat, and tries to get him to lift his head. Gilgamesh asks Enkidu what kind of “sleep” has now seized him, and reflects upon the adventures they shared together, in their expedition to the Cedar Forest and their battle with the Bull of Heaven.

Gilgamesh’s grief is expressed in terms of animality, but also the love of a husband and wife. These metaphors give expression to the passionate nature of Gilgamesh’s emotional reaction to Enkidu’s death, and the depth of this reaction clearly reflects the hero’s profound love for his companion. In this section, too, Gilgamesh changes physically, by tearing out his hair and removing his clothes.

In the use of leonine imagery, the composers show unexpected sensitivity to the plight of the mother lion, but the focus is on the magnitude of Gilgamesh’s sorrow. Mesopotamian metaphorical statements using animal symbolism have been shown to keep an emphasis on the primary, human subject (Watanabe, 2002: 43). The usage of animal imagery in this way allows the composers to clearly represent powerful ideas to the audience, using paradigms that could be commonly understood, while strengthening the characterisation of the *Epic*’s hero (Pryke, 2017b).

The connection between grieving and leonine imagery in the narrative is strengthened by the hero wrapping himself in lion-skin following the death of his companion. In his choice of animal-skin dress, Gilgamesh reveals the power of his grief to expose his most basic, animalistic side, creating a contrast with the themes of humanity, civilisation and kingship. Gilgamesh’s choice to shed his fine clothing is predicted by Shamash in Tablet VII, and is then articulated by the hero in Tablet VIII:

And I, after you (Enkidu) are gone [I shall have] myself [bear
the matted hair of mourning],

I shall don the skin of a [lion] and [go roaming the wild.]

(SBV VIII: 90–91)

Gilgamesh's travels in the wilderness are motivated by his grief, but also by his fear of his own mortality:

For his friend Enkidu Gilgameš

Was weeping bitterly as he roamed the wild:

‘I (Gilgameš) shall die, and shall I not then be like Enkidu?

Sorrow has entered my heart.

I became afraid of death, so go roaming in the wild,

To Ūta-napišti, son of Ubār-Tutu,

I am on the road and travelling swiftly.

(SBV IX: 1–7)

The mourning rites for Enkidu take place in an urban setting, and once they are complete, Gilgamesh's grief propels him into the wild and away from Uruk. The setting of Uruk for Enkidu's funerary rites and scenes of mourning creates a contrast with the celebrations of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Uruk in Tablet VI, and Shamhat's description of the festive city in Tablet I.

Animality, humanity, and divinity: relative terms?

Animality, humanity, and divinity are presented on a relative spectrum in Gilgamesh's characterisation. These aspects are in constant tension with one another through the course of his adventures. The motif of human-animal separation in Gilgamesh has been well elucidated by Barron, who notes the difficulties and costs of the transition from wild animal to civilised human:

A central tenet of Gilgamesh is that when humans deny themselves direct identification with and access to wild, animal nature, despite all possible resuscitative efforts of civilization-however well intentioned and desirous of “cultivated” order-confused social strife and ecological crisis will result.

(Barron, 2002: 393)

There is a clear hierarchy to concepts of animality, humanity, and divinity in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As Gilgamesh learns at the end of his

travels, the Mesopotamian deities in their wisdom and immortality inhabited a sphere with higher status than the inhabitants of the human and animal worlds.

One might argue that humanity is presented as being, in some ways, hierarchically superior to animality also. This view could be based on the use of animals in the text for serving the needs of humans and gods, and their valuation in terms of economic worth. Accepting the concept of animals in *Gilgamesh* as inhabiting a lower status than humans would nicely fill out the relative spectrum with a clear stratum of value, yet would likely oversimplify matters in a way that would not give a representative account of the complexity of the subject within the text. Animality and civilisation are presented in multifaceted ways that reveal benefits and drawbacks on both sides, and the characterisation of human and animal actors in *Gilgamesh* is similarly thoughtful.

Animals and heroes

In this book, Gilgamesh's character is considered in the context of his role as a Mesopotamian hero. Gilgamesh's treatment of animals is reasonably consistent across the different versions of his story—animals for Gilgamesh are generally adversaries or material assets. How much of Gilgamesh's interactions with animals should be considered unique to him? How do Mesopotamian heroes relate to animals in epic narratives?

Animal encounters are a common feature of Mesopotamian myths and legends, and these interactions can take numerous forms. Although Gilgamesh has several fights with animal and supernatural beasts in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the interactions between heroes and beasts in Mesopotamian epic literature are not always adversarial, and at times is powerfully and reciprocally beneficial.

Kindness to animals

Biophilic encounters with animals and supernatural beasts feature as significant narrative events in several Mesopotamian epics. In the Sumerian epic of *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*, the heroic king Lugalbanda (who is the literary father of Gilgamesh in many traditions, see [Chapter 1](#)) treats a fledgling Anzud bird with care and

kindness. An Anzud bird is a mythical Mesopotamian beast.

Given the descriptive name of “Thunderbird” by Jacobsen, the Anzud bird is a creature which appears frequently in narrative literature relating to Mesopotamian kings. While the bird is identified as a symbol of “power and aggression,” it can also be a helper (Veldhuis, 2004: 30–36. For comparisons between the Anzud bird with the mountain bird of biblical and rabbinic literature, see Wazana, 2009).

A giant bird, in the form of an eagle, plays a key role in the Sumerian *Legend of Etana*. In this myth, the goddess Inanna is looking for a “shepherd” to lead the people, and it is decided the Etana will be the ruler. Later in the narrative, Etana assists the starving eagle on the advice of Shamash (Sumerian Utu), which then helps him in his attempt to retrieve a special plant from the deities in heaven. In his consideration of the Semitic context of Etana, Winitzer notes that the eagle’s role forms part of a thematic concern in the narrative with navigating boundaries and divine limits (2013: 445). Winitzer also sees parallels between the Etana and Gilgamesh narratives, with the eagle’s loss of plumage in Etana compared to the shedding of the snake’s skin in Gilgamesh (2013: 455).

Gilgamesh’s contact with animals more often than not results in conflict, yet Gilgamesh’s positive interaction with an animal forms one of the few lasting references to the Mesopotamian legend preserved in Classical literature. In Aelian’s *On the Nature of Animals*, Gilgamesh’s birth story is given as an example of the kindness of animals to humans. The Roman author Claudius Aelianus, now known as Aelian, was born in Praeneste (now Palestrina, close to Rome) between 165 and 170 CE (McNamee, 2011). Aelian’s *magnum opus* was an encyclopaedic composition devoted to exploring the behaviour and nature of animals.

In Aelian’s story, the infant Gilgamesh is cast from a summit, but saved by a swooping eagle, which carries the baby to safety.

A love of man is another characteristic of animals. At any rate an Eagle fostered a baby. ... When Seuechoros was king of Babylon the Chaldeans foretold that the son born of his daughter would wrest the kingdom from his grandfather. This made him afraid and ... he put the strictest of watches upon her. For all that, since fate was cleverer than the king of Babylon, the girl became a mother, being pregnant by some obscure man. So the guards from fear of the King hurled the infant from the citadel, for that was where the

aforesaid girl was imprisoned. Now an Eagle which saw with its piercing eye the child while still falling, before it was dashed to the earth, flew beneath it, flung its back under it, and conveyed it to some garden and set it down with the utmost care. But when the keeper of the place saw the pretty baby he fell in love with it and nursed it; and it was called Gilgames and became king of Babylon.

(Aelian, *De Natura Animalum* 12.21)

Aelian's account of "Gilgames" holds some features in common with the Mesopotamian traditions surrounding the hero. Gilgamesh is said to be the king of lower Mesopotamia, and he is a descendant of Enmerkar. The name of Gilgames' grandfather "Seuechoros" is considered a corruption of the name "Euechoros," a name appearing in Aelian and Berossus and considered to be the Greek equivalent of the name of the Mesopotamian king "Enmerkar" (Jacobsen, 1939). In the *Sumerian King List*, Enmerkar is Lugalbanda's father, making him Gilgamesh's grandfather (at least in those traditions where Lugalbanda is identified as Gilgamesh's father).

There is another potential similarity between the two traditions involving Gilgamesh's ancestry. In *The Nature of Animals*, Gilgames' father is said to be "some obscure man." While Gilgamesh's father is commonly identified as Lugalbanda, scholars have noted the obscurity and ambiguity of Gilgamesh's paternity (see [Chapter 1](#)). The uncertainty found in some ancient sources around Gilgamesh's parentage seems to be continued in Aelian (George, 2003: 106).

Henkelman has given a detailed analysis of how Aelian's account of the birth narrative of "Gilgames" blends together familiar aspects of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh, Enmerkar, and Sargon narratives, to produce a kind of mythical mixture of tropes from ancient narratives (2006). Henkelman plausibly suggests that the account in Aelian reflects an oral Mesopotamian tradition, where the elements of the familiar stories of Sargon, Enmerkar and Gilgamesh may have become intertwined. For the narrative of Sargon, there is the similarity of the birth narrative involving a foundling who is raised by a gardener.

Henkelman also notes the parallels with the story of Etana, particularly with the beneficence of the eagle, who gives the royal protagonist a means to fly. Henkelman is careful to stress that the limitations imposed by the nature of the material and the difficulty involved in tracing cross-cultural influences necessitates a continued lack of certainty in how, and indeed if, these elements may have appeared in the Classical account.

Conclusion

The natural environment plays a powerful role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The ecological focus of the narrative involves descriptions of geography, weather events, and considerations of the beauty and value of the natural world. The natural world provides an important contrast for the supernatural elements of the text, and the non-human animal inhabitants of the environment are utilised as characters, symbols and as the source of literary analogies, imagery, and as units of measure. The natural world is not a passive backdrop for the events of the narrative. Instead, environmental factors play a central role in the hero's adventures, while at the same time being deeply embedded in the Epic's esoteric considerations involving humanity, divinity, and mortality.

The Epic of Gilgamesh provides a complicated and moving literary portrait of the natural environment and its non-human animal inhabitants. The heroes of the *Epic*, along with its composers, show an appreciation of nature which could be viewed as some of the earliest literary evidence for the modern concept of biophilia. As environmental concerns for the planet on which we live increase in the present day, it is significant to consider the biophilic qualities of the world's most ancient epic literature.

The natural world is given a vividly powerful presence in the text of *Gilgamesh*. Through evocative descriptions and thoughtful thematic engagement, the natural world is presented with complexity that shows an appreciation for the powerful economic, aesthetic and esoteric qualities of nature. At the same time, there is a clear acknowledgement of the destructive potential of the world's ecosystems, and the critical need for environmental balance.



Love and family

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* involves the tragic love story of the heroic protagonist and his companion, Enkidu. This love story is central to the plot of the *Epic*, and the relationship is an important element in several other stories, such as *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. The focus in *Gilgamesh* on the emotional journey of the characters is distinctive in the broader context of Ancient Near Eastern literature (see Römer and Bonjour, 2016).

A great deal of productive scholarship has been dedicated to understanding the nature of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, with emphasis on the question of whether their love contained a sexual element. It is now relatively well accepted in modern scholarship that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are sexual partners (see for example George, 2003: 902f, Beckman, 2008: 124). Yet the intricate relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh involves much more than a physical, sexual bond. Their love is transformative for both heroes—it is Gilgamesh who is the cause of Enkidu's civilisation, and it is the loss of Enkidu that inspires Gilgamesh to alter his life's focus. The strength of the love between the pair endures even beyond death, giving their bond a kind of immortality.

Enkidu is not Gilgamesh's only lover, however; his loves in various compositions take many forms, including a probable pairing with the goddess of love, Inanna, in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the nether world*. Alongside his experiences with romantic and sexual love, Gilgamesh also experiences familial love, which forms an important part of his journey and identity.

This chapter continues the focus from the previous chapters on exploring Gilgamesh's identity. Love is central to Gilgamesh's characterisation: it is a guiding and shaping force that exerts powerful influence on his actions and choices. An aim of this book is to consider the ways that Gilgamesh's character, in a number of sources, is shaped by the narrative of his adventures, and how the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

reflects aspects of the hero's identity. Love is central to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a narrative as well as to its heroic protagonist. There is diversity in the types of love experienced by Gilgamesh, and presented throughout the composition. This chapter considers the themes of love and family as they relate to the *Epic's* eponymous hero.

Love in Mesopotamia

Love was a powerful force in ancient Mesopotamia: emotional ties bonded together households and communities, and formed a significant element in everyday life. The bonds of love also joined the human and divine worlds, where close emotional ties between humans and divinities played a crucial role in the functioning and maintenance of universal order.

Despite a rigid hierarchy in favour of the divine, these relationships were frequently presented in various texts as close, involving strong emotional bonds. The human/divine connection was not solely beneficial to either party, but reciprocal and often mutually rewarding (Pryke, 2016a).

The Mesopotamian deity most frequently noted for her connection to love is Ishtar, who makes a memorable appearance in Tablet VI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In many Mesopotamian literary sources, love was presented as necessary for the continuation of mortal life, but also as an essential quality for giving meaning to the human condition.

Mother love

While the love between Enkidu and Gilgamesh has been the focus of much scholarly attention, the loving bond between Gilgamesh and his divine mother, Ninsun, has received less attention. Gilgamesh's connection to Ninsun is powerful and functions, along with his bond with Enkidu, as one of his most significant relationships—both connections assist in the shaping and development of his character.

The depiction of women in Mesopotamian literature is a topic which invites consideration of how textual portrayals of female characters may reflect (or possibly distort) the image of historical Mesopotamian women. Gadotti has demonstrated that Sumerian literature is an important tool for understanding the historical role and function of women in society (2011). When considering the divine experience of marital unions, Vanstiphout (1987: 175–177) has

sensibly pointed out the similarities between the divine “marriage machine” and historical courtship between mortals, while also noting the limits of our understanding for where the similarities between the divine and mortal experiences may begin and end. The point is further illustrated by Scurlock (2003) who shows evidence of a complex combination of realistic and fantastical elements in the myth of *Enlil and Ninlil*.

By considering female literary characters within the broader context of Mesopotamian culture, society, and history, it may be possible to gain a greater insight into the ways in which the presentation of female characters in *Gilgamesh* either conforms with or subverts existing tropes. Yet, the study of women in ancient Mesopotamia is an area of scholarship which has only begun to develop very recently. Although several recent volumes have significantly contributed to increasing what is known of women in Mesopotamia, the breadth and diversity of the topic means its modern understanding is still unfolding. Although too vast a subject to be considered in detail here, a brief overview of women in Mesopotamia will be given later in this chapter, in line with the aim of this book to provide an accessible entry into the world of ancient Mesopotamia as a context for *Gilgamesh*.

Women in Mesopotamia

The study of women in ancient Mesopotamia is a field which promises to provide unprecedented insights into the early civilisations of the Ancient Near East (see recently Chavalas, 2014, and Stol, 2016). The exciting potential of this area of study stems from its diversity and depth. The historical and social position of women in Mesopotamia has been the focus of sustained academic research for only the past thirty years or so, possibly due to the overwhelmingly vast nature of the subject. This idea has been well elucidated by Bahrani, who notes in her analysis of gender and representation in Mesopotamia that the reluctance of scholars to take on the subject is perhaps more related to an overabundance of evidence rather than a lack of it (2001: 2). Bahrani gives a useful analogy to illustrate the scope of the field of study:

One cannot expect to exhaust the subject of women in the ancient Near East, any more than one can expect to write a detailed catalogue of, say, men in Europe from ancient Greece to the

It is not the length of time alone, or the diversity of cultures and places covered, that makes for a challenging subject in the study of Mesopotamian women. There are inherent difficulties in the interpretation of the available sources, which can only give a partial perspective of women in antiquity. Further, the diversity of women's roles, lives, and images in ancient Mesopotamia adds to the intricacy of the subject. Although only considered briefly here, the diversity of women in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* reflects the broader trend of "infinite variety" in the images of women in Mesopotamian literature, to misappropriate Jacobsen's phrasing (1976: 143).

The society of Mesopotamia was patriarchal, meaning that there was an unbalanced distribution of power and status between men and women. Women's lives and resources were, generally speaking, subject to the authority of male relatives, although less egregiously so than in ancient Israel, Greece, or the European Middle Ages (Cooper, 1997: 89). Women were employed in numerous domestic and economic roles, and were integral to the structure and functioning of the Mesopotamian household. The "home" in Mesopotamia was a complex spatial zone (Veenhof, 1996).

The household formed the basic socio-economic unit of society, and a home could provide physical shelter while also serving as the location for domestic activities and religious observance. The woman's role in the home reflected the diversity of the institution of the household. In the fields of love and sexuality, there was greater equality for women than in other areas of life (Bottéro, 2004: 95), and both sexes were entitled to the enjoyment of sexuality.

The position of women varied greatly depending on issues such as economic and social status. Mesopotamia is considered to have been a patrilineal society where property was primarily devolved through men, yet some women could inherit a father or husband's property in absence of a male heir. Women of high social status may have enjoyed greater independence than women inhabiting a lower social sphere, and free women had different experiences to slave women.

Another factor influencing the experience of women in ancient Mesopotamia would be their transitioning through various stages of life, from childhood to girlhood (about which very little is known), to a young woman and through to old age. During these stages, a woman might inhabit the roles of daughter, mother, wife and widow, with

these roles holding different responsibilities, expectations and cultural significance. Marriage was one of many “rites de passage” underscoring the transition of individuals through life events (Roth, 1987: 716), and could involve swift changes in social status.

In addition to domestic and economic roles, women were involved in many aspects of religious life; from maintaining household religious practices to serving in temples. The Mesopotamian goddess of love, Ishtar, played an important role in periods of transition for women as they moved from one stage of development, or one social role, to another—demonstrating the goddess’s capacity for transformation.

Woman wisdom

In literary works, women fulfil a variety of roles, and are frequently presented with the capacity to provide counsel. Mesopotamian narrative literature generally features male protagonists, but divine women, such as Ishtar and Ereshkigal, are the focus of many myths. Mortal women, too, can be seen playing a prominent role in narrative works at times, such as the “wise woman” Sagburu who fights a wizarding battle to help the king gain divine favour in *Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna*. Women were recognised as possessing wisdom, and the importance of the maternal role was widely emphasised. The emotional ecology of women in Mesopotamia showed some differentiation to that of men. Compassion was viewed as a “feminine” trait, and anxiety and fear were also more closely identified with women (Stol, 2016: 684–685). Women, even divine ones, were considered more “approachable” than males (Asher-Greve, 2013: 21), and in religious matters often provided intercession (Stol, 2016).

It is useful to consider the presentation of “masculinity” as well as “femininity” in Mesopotamian literature. The understanding of “masculine” and “feminine” qualities may be assisted by referencing the traits associated with hegemonic men. The qualities of hegemonic masculinity were frequently presented in a dimorphic manner, through contrast with non-hegemonic men and women (Peled, 2016: 161). In his analysis of representations of Mesopotamian masculinity, Peled describes hegemonic males as acting in a patriarchal social structure, having an active and penetrative sexuality, possessing expertise in skilled crafts, great physical size and strength, military prowess and engagement with the public rather than private sphere (2016). These “masculine” qualities could be contrasted against “feminine” ones to provide a dimorphic definition of gendered traits, however Peled makes the useful observation that gender identity

cannot be conceived of as a fixed category. Instead, gender identity is a dynamic concept which is continually reshaped through social interactions and power struggles (2016).

Returning our focus to women in *Gilgamesh*, it is worth noting that most sources for historical women in Mesopotamia come from texts which might be classified as “non-narrative,” such as legal and economic documents. Narrative works, such as poetic literature, often represent divine women or women of a high social status, limiting their capacity to illuminate the lives of most (mortal) Mesopotamian women.

It remains difficult to be certain how closely female characters in literature may reflect the social and cultural reality of their historical sisters—although recent work has demonstrated the usefulness of the careful analyses of narrative literature in this area (see especially Gadotti, 2011, noted earlier).

Women in *Gilgamesh*

The narrative focus for much of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* centres on the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The focus on two heroes may give the superficial impression that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is preoccupied with male characters—but this impression would not provide an accurate reflection of the narrative’s gender balance. Female characters are a significant and prominent part of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, as well as in some of the Sumerian narratives involving the Urukian hero.

From the beautiful Shamhat who leads Enkidu to humanity, to the wise goddess Siduri who provides Gilgamesh with counsel, women inhabit diverse roles in the narrative. Female figures are often presented with depth and complexity. While the gender of characters such as Ishtar and Ninsun informs their characterisation, it does not entirely define their presentation in the text.

The role of women in the *Gilgamesh* narrative was first given detailed consideration by Harris, with her article “Images of Women in the *Gilgamesh Epic*” (1990). Harris’ later work noted the ambiguity and diversity of female actors in the epic (2001). The importance of maternal symbolism in the narrative was recognised by Harris, and this observation is explored further later in this chapter. Harris’ significant contribution to the modern appreciation of *Gilgamesh*

provided a starting point for redressing the *Epic*'s previously somewhat androcentric reception. Harris observed the generally positive depiction of women in the narrative, yet qualified this point by noting that this "positive" presentation was conditioned by the capacity of the female figures to assist the hero. In my view, this point can be equally applied to figures of either sex—the positive presentation of male characters in the *Epic* is at least partially connected to their ability to assist the hero also.

Considering the presentation of women in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents further questions surrounding the production and consumption of Mesopotamian literature. It is generally accepted that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written by men for a male audience (for example, Harris, 1997: 79), yet as discussed in the Introduction, the history of the *Epic* is complex and somewhat enigmatic, and its ancient audience is similarly unclear. If we accept a dominantly male mode of production and consumption for literature featuring Gilgamesh, then female characters in this literature can be thought to be presented from an androcentric perspective.

In her exploration of women and gender in Babylonia, Steele noted that the advice of Siduri to Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic* gives a male-oriented perspective on the wise acquisition of the "good life" through the lens of a female character (2007: 299). Siduri's recommendation for Gilgamesh is to enjoy good food, clean clothes and the company of his wife and child (*Gilgamesh* OB VA + BM lines 6–15).

Steele wryly observes that the "good life" described for Gilgamesh in the text seems rather reliant on the "work of women" (2007: 299). Despite the bucolic tone of the passage, it seems certain that *someone* must prepare the food and clean the clothes, and Steele displays further incredulity over the possibility of a female character being encouraged to "consider the child that clutches your hand." A similar argument could be made in terms of societal status—domestic labouring would be less arduous for women of higher status who would likely have had help in the home. Steele's observations illustrate the importance of considering the authorship and audience of *Gilgamesh* for discussions around women and gender in the texts.

In line with Harris, it is the view here that women in *Gilgamesh* are generally presented in positive yet diverse ways. Collectively and individually, women fill a variety of roles and show varying levels of agency. Women characters are frequently presented as possessing wisdom, yet the types of wisdom held by different female characters

shows variety.

In narratives involving Gilgamesh, there are several prominent female characters. Ninsun, explored in detail later in this chapter, is shown to be wise, protective, and proactive. Ishtar is, well, Ishtar (for a more detailed consideration of Ishtar and *Gilgamesh*, see Pryke, 2017a). Shamhat embodies wisdom, beauty, and vitality, although she acts on the orders of others, in aid of an agenda set by Gilgamesh. Siduri offers insight and appears to operate independently. Even unnamed characters, such as Utanapishtim's wife and the Scorpion Woman, are intriguing figures. The variety and depth of female characters can be compared with the presentation of male characters, which also shows diversity.

The presence of women in the narrative of *Gilgamesh* has been the recent focus of productive scholarship. Like the study of women in Mesopotamia more generally, this topic is still in its early days and there are many areas around which our understanding is very limited. This avenue of narrative analysis has the potential to further illuminate our modern understanding of gender in ancient Mesopotamia—as well as giving a clearer perspective of the *Epic* itself.

Ninsun

Ninsun, like Enkidu, is a powerful character in her own right. While perhaps best known for her role as the hero's mother in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ninsun is also a dynamic figure in the broader context of Mesopotamian literary and religious culture.

In a narrative involving numerous strong female actors, Ninsun stands apart in terms of her closeness to the hero, and her importance in his identification and legacy. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the Sumerian poem of the *Death of Gilgamesh* (considered in [Chapter 6](#)), Ninsun plays a pivotal role in the progression of the narrative.

Ninsun: literature and history

Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun first appears in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic* coupled with Gilgamesh's father, Lugalbanda:

Wild bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgameš, perfect of strength,
suckling of the exalted cow, Wild-Cow Ninsun!

(SBV I: 35–36)

Even for Mesopotamian heroic epic, this introductory passage is

heavy on bovine imagery—a feature of the text that perhaps requires comment. Ninsun is at times described as a kind of deified cow (as can be seen on the Gudea cylinders), and her cult may have originally been associated with wild cattle (Black and Green, 1992: 141). Although originally imaged in cow shape (Jacobsen, 1970b: 26), Ninsun was human in nature (Maul, 2005), and gave birth to human offspring, such as the rulers Shulgi, Ur-Nammu, and Sin-kashid (Stol, 2000: 86).

The frequent allusive coupling of heroes and wild cattle (bulls or cows) is an expression of power and strength, with bovine imagery also invoked in the praise of kings and deities. In material culture, the “horned cap” (a cap with superimposed pairs of horns) was a distinctive headdress of divinity from the early third millennium BCE, and may have been derived from the horns of wild cattle (Black and Green, 1992: 102).

Ninsun, mother of kings

Maternal symbolism in Gilgamesh, particularly within the characterisation of Ninsun, reflects similar thematic elements with the hymns of the early Mesopotamian kings. For the historical kings of the Ur III dynasty, the Uruk I dynasty, especially the character of Gilgamesh, formed a “cornerstone” of royal ideology (Woods, 2012: 79).

Maternal imagery in royal poetry is connected at times with divine protection, particularly in the field of battle. Ninsun displays the protective nature of maternal love, and the connection of maternal love with divine protection may be found in royal hymns such as the praise poetry of Shulgi of Ur, as well as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, making it an important trope in different literary genres. Royal hymns from the Ur III period utilise maternal imagery, including the claim of being the royal progeny of Ninsun, to symbolise the closeness of the king with divinities:

(Shulgi speaks) “Since it was for my true mother Ninsumun that my mother together with her actually bore me to bestow joy and gladness, lovingly she cherished my unborn fruit. She did not endure scandal from anyone’s mouth. Before she released her little one, this lady passed her time in my palace in the greatest joy.”

(*A Praise Poem of Šulgi*, ETCSL 2.4.2.02)

Shulgi was an historical king of the Ur III dynasty, who succeeded

his father, the famous Ur-Nammu, and reigned for 48 years (Sallaberger, 1999: 140–161). Shulgi is not alone in his use of maternal imagery in praise poetry. Like several other kings, he used maternal imagery to bind him to the Sumerian love deity, Inanna (as well as spousal and sibling imagery). The breasts of the goddess, with their maternal import, are thematically linked to the protection and support of the king, particularly in battle (Pryke, 2017a).

‘In battle I (Inanna) will be the one who goes before you. In combat I will carry your weapon like a personal attendant ... You are worthy to delight yourself on my holy breast like a pure calf. May your love be lasting!’ ... Thus Inana treated him tenderly.

(*Shulgi X*, ETCSL 2.4.2.24)

In these two excerpts from Shulgi’s poetry, the king alludes to at least two and probably three mother figures that relate to his birth and rearing. Shulgi’s multiplicity of mothers demonstrates the potent poetic nature of the imagery. The king’s literary relationships with mother figures held a protective and legitimising function, and involved significant political and religious currency. Maternal love was a powerful force in the propaganda of early Mesopotamian kings, and is similarly significant for the narratives of *Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh and maternal love

Maternal love is presented in many forms throughout the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Mother figures in the epic poems are divine and mortal, human and animal. The types of maternal imagery used by the composers show great diversity, from the metaphor of the lioness who mourns the separation from her cubs, to the goddess Aruru who creates Enkidu from clay, through to Gilgamesh’s close relationship with his mother. Even in light of this variety, maternal symbolism in *Gilgamesh*, particularly within the characterisation of Ninsun, reflects similar thematic elements with the hymns of the kings of Ur III.

Gilgamesh’s close emotional ties with his divine mother Ninsun form one of his most significant relationships. The bond between the hero and his mother is rivalled only by his connection to Enkidu in terms of the relationship’s power to shape and influence Gilgamesh’s actions and choices.

Ninsun’s unique closeness to Gilgamesh means that she can provide a comparison with which to consider Enkidu’s powerful influence—as Foster has noted, characters in *Gilgamesh* can function as contrasting

symbols (2001: xvii). Both Ninsun and Enkidu are portrayed endeavouring to protect Gilgamesh. Yet Ninsun is presented as holding special competence in religious matters; she correctly interprets dreams, expertly prepares sacrifices, and intercedes on Gilgamesh's behalf with Shamash. Enkidu, conversely, misinterprets dreams, bungles sacrifices, and, alongside Gilgamesh, antagonises primary deities.

Gilgamesh's close relationship with his mother is perhaps surprising when considered against modern-day assumptions of "heroic" conduct, which can frequently be seen to be presented in terms of hyper-masculinity and independence in popular culture. The connection of Gilgamesh and Ninsun, however, is closely entwined with Gilgamesh's identification as a hero and king; his divine mother lends him supernatural qualities.

The maternal bond is important also in terms of the *Epic's* overarching concerns with mortality, death, and the transition through life stages. Harris raises the suggestion that the prevalence of the mother image in *Gilgamesh* provides a contrast and complement to the dangers of the hero's journey. For Harris, the maternal theme may reflect "the wish for the intimacy of the mother-child relationship in infancy, for a time of deep security and ignorance of death and thus distance from the reality of human mortality" (2000: 217).

We have already noted the use of maternal imagery in royal praise poetry. The presence of wise mother figures is a feature of Mesopotamian literature more broadly, such as in other epic narratives. Two poetic legends involving Lugalbanda also present the hero longing for his mother's company. These compositions are *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave*, and *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*. In both legends, the hero misses his mother while spending a long period of time away from home. Both legends also feature the hero missing the advice and company of his father.

Lugalbanda lies idle in the mountains, in the faraway places; he has ventured into the Zabu mountains. No mother is with him to offer advice, no father is with him to talk to him. No one is with him whom he knows, whom he values, no confidant is there to talk to him.

(*Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*, ETCSL 1.8.2.2)

The absence of a father figure for Gilgamesh through most of the *Epic* may create further emphasis on the relationship with his mother.

The combination of the tropes of the absent father and the wandering hero, situated in a story involving a young king, raises the narrative stakes for the hero's eventual rise to successfully inhabiting the role of the king—there is no elder king minding the shop in Uruk while Gilgamesh travels beyond the edges of the earth. Paternal guidance is substituted by the voices of the city's elders, who urge Gilgamesh not to undertake his dangerous journeys, and through the care of deities such as Shamash.

Although, as noted earlier, it is a trope in the Mesopotamian oeuvre for the hero to long to be with his parents, the maternal lap is not always presented in purely positive terms. The female lap is emblematically complex territory, rich with symbolism involving concepts of maturity and gender. As Cooper has observed, masculinity, in some areas of Mesopotamian literature, was articulated through behaving in the manner of an adult male: performing as a strong warrior, invigilating good governance, and not over-indulging in the company of women or the enjoyment of the arts (2017: 119). This definition of masculinity, used by Cooper to discuss the historical record of Shamshi-Adad I, may not precisely match the extremely complex conception of masculinity and gender in narratives involving Gilgamesh, but is worthy of further consideration in terms of the hero's characterisation and maturity.

Jacobsen has described Gilgamesh as a kind of “Peter Pan” figure:

... Gilgamesh appears as young, a mere boy, and he holds on to that status, refusing to exchange it for adulthood as represented by marriage and parenthood. Like Barrie's Peter Pan he will not grow up.

(Jacobsen, 1976: 218)

If masculinity in royal literature is related to expressions of adulthood, then the rejection of parental influence may be considered as an articulation of maturity. There is much more to maturity than alienation from the constructs of childhood, however, and closeness to one's parents in Mesopotamian literature is presented as a positive quality for leaders. As noted in the quote from Jacobsen, it is not distance from one's parents so much as becoming a parent oneself which is more commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity in Mesopotamia (Peled, 2016: 162). While the desire to behave as an adult male is, generally-speaking, a positive trait in a king and a hero, it seems there is more at work here than an adolescent struggle for

independence.

Gilgamesh and Ninsun in *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*

In the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*, Enkidu's failure to match Gilgamesh's enthusiasm for the quest ahead results in a speech from the hero. In this dialogue, Gilgamesh speaks in a manner which hints at a lack of appropriate respect for his family and his mother's lap:

By the life of my own mother Ninsumun and of my father, holy Lugalbanda! Am I to become again as if I were slumbering still on the lap of my own mother Ninsumun?

(*Gilgamesh and Humbaba* A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

This comment from Gilgamesh is striking, as the mother's lap is generally symbolic of safety and can also represent royal legitimacy. As noted earlier, maternal symbolism is often featured in royal praise poetry, such as that of the historical king Shulgi of Ur:

(Ninsun speaks:) Šulgi, you are a pure calf, born to me. You are a good seed of Lugal-banda. I raised you upon my own holy lap. I have decided your fate with my holy bosom. You are a good fortune which fell to my share.

(*A Praise Poem of Šulgi*, ETCSL 2.4.2.16)

While Gilgamesh speaks scornfully of Ninsun's lap, Shulgi uses the goddess' body as a symbol of his closeness to the divine and his legitimacy. In the projected speech of the deity, the reciprocity of the maternal bond is expressed: Shulgi brings good fortune to Ninsun, and she decides his (favourable) fate.

Gilgamesh's scoffing is preceded in the text of *Gilgamesh and Humbaba* with a reference to another mother's physicality. This time the divine mother is the goddess Ningal, mother of Utu and Inanna:

(Enkidu speaks:) Proud Utu has already gone to the bosom of his mother Ningal. Gilgameš, how long will you sleep for? The sons of your city who came with you should not have to wait at the foot of the hills. Their own mothers should not have to twine string in the square of your city.

(*Gilgamesh and Humbaba* A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

The contrast between positive maternal imagery, used by Enkidu, and negative maternal imagery given by Gilgamesh, illustrates the deep divide between the pair in terms of their attitudes towards the journey ahead. The juxtaposition of maternal symbolism does more than emphasise the discord between the two companions; it throws a negative light on Gilgamesh's speech and actions. While the deity Utu is said to be travelling home to his mother (a symbolic reference to the lapsing of daylight), Gilgamesh, in contrast, refuses to do the same.

The attempt by Enkidu to use maternal imagery to dissuade Gilgamesh from his plans holds a tragic irony. Enkidu, as we have seen in [Chapter 3](#), has no mother or father of his own, a situation that is frequently contrasted against Gilgamesh's divine parentage. While Enkidu speaks of the need to spare the "mothers of the square" worry over their warrior sons, Gilgamesh shows no such concern over his own mother's feelings—yet does display an awareness of the importance of sparing parents the distress of losing their children in battle, when selecting which men will not accompany him on the journey to the forest:

Citizens! You who have a wife, go to your wife! You who have children, go to your children! Warriors, whether experienced or inexperienced, who have no wife, who have no children – let such people join me at my side as the companions of Gilgameš.

(Gilgamesh and Humbaba Version B, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

Let him who has a household go to his household! Let him who has a mother go to his mother!

(Gilgameš and Huwawa Version A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

To make the contrast clearer still, the text goes on to have Enkidu remind Gilgamesh of the desirability of avoiding upsetting his divine mother, Ninsun:

(Enkidu speaks:) Travel on, my master, up into the mountains! – but I shall travel back to the city. If I say to your mother about you "He is alive!", she will laugh. But afterwards I shall say to her about you "He is dead!", and she will certainly weep.

(Gilgameš and Huwawa A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

Gilgamesh's cavalier behaviour towards his mother foreshadows his later use during combat of the names of his parents in vows he makes

—and then breaks—to Humbaba. The use of his parents’ names to fortify a false oath is an act of sacrilege, and the underhand nature of Gilgamesh’s actions are denounced by the forest guardian in a version of the Sumerian story:

(Humbaba speaks): ‘Warrior, you lied! You have manhandled me; yet you had sworn an oath, by the life of your own mother Ninsun and of your father, holy Lugalbanda.’

(*Gilgamesh and Humbaba* B, ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1)

In fact, even the forest guardian Humbaba seems to hold a more respectful view of Gilgamesh’s mother than the hero himself. In Humbaba’s opening address to Gilgamesh in *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*, the forest guardian lauds the role of Ninsun in raising a powerful son:

(Huwawa addressed Gilgamesh:) ‘So come on now, you heroic bearer of a sceptre of wide-ranging power! Noble glory of the gods, angry bull standing ready for a fight! Your mother knew well how to bear sons, and your nurse knew well how to nourish children on the breast! Don’t be afraid, rest your hand on the ground!’

(*Gilgamesh and Huwawa* A, ETCSL 1.8.1.5)

In contrast, in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic*, it is Enkidu’s parentage that is the subject of Humbaba’s opening address, with the forest guardian remarking on Enkidu’s status as an orphan (considered in detail in [Chapter 3](#)). In the Standard Version too, Humbaba is aware of Gilgamesh’s parentage, and seems to speak praisingly of Gilgamesh’s background (SBV V: 145–148).

There is irony to Gilgamesh’s somewhat reckless attitude towards his parents in *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*. The importance of family, and Gilgamesh’s divine heritage, are significant themes in the Sumerian narratives as well as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Further, it is through Gilgamesh’s mother that the king receives the opportunity to access a fate beyond the reach of the rest of humanity, with a special role in the afterlife, shown in the myth of *The Death of Gilgamesh*. While Gilgamesh displays dismissive behaviour towards his parents, the narrative contrasts this behaviour against the speeches of other characters, thereby showing Gilgamesh’s attitude to be anomalous.

Gilgamesh and Ninsun in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

Gilgamesh takes a more respectful tone towards his mother in the Akkadian versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The closeness of the

mother/son relationship can be seen in many aspects of the narrative: Ninsun is Gilgamesh's confidant, his protector, and his counsellor. Ninsun promotes and formalises Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu, and she uses her divine influence to further her son's interests.

Enkidu and Ninsun share a mutually sympathetic relationship in several versions of the narrative. The positive relations between the pair is perhaps most clearly seen in Tablet III of the Standard Babylonian Version, where Ninsun adopts Enkidu and makes him Gilgamesh's brother. For Enkidu as well as Gilgamesh, Ninsun's affections are powerful and capable of granting social legitimacy and status.

The closeness between Gilgamesh and Ninsun is apparent in Tablet I, where Gilgamesh twice goes to his mother to interpret his dreams of Enkidu's impending arrival. Ninsun correctly interprets the dreams and their significance for her son's future. In Tablet II, Gilgamesh introduces Enkidu to his mother. Unfortunately, this section of the manuscript is badly broken and it is difficult to make a clear interpretation of the contents of the section. Gilgamesh laudingly presents Enkidu to Ninsun, but Ninsun seems to comment on the difficult position of Enkidu, as he moves from the wilderness to civilisation.

Once Gilgamesh and Enkidu (but mostly Gilgamesh) have decided to travel to the Cedar Forest and fight Humbaba, Gilgamesh appears to seek the blessings of the young men of Uruk, and then the city's elders. In the Old Babylonian Version, the elders urge Gilgamesh's personal god, Lugalbanda, to protect him and help him to attain his desire "like a child," but they also remind Gilgamesh to pour libations to Lugalbanda, demonstrating the reciprocity of the relationship. The Standard Version also emphasises the primacy of religious piety, with Gilgamesh promising to observe the *akitu* festival twice in a year, and to include his mother, Ninsun, in the celebration.

After visiting the elders, Gilgamesh again goes to his mother and confides in her of his upcoming military campaign. Prior to the visit, Gilgamesh informs Enkidu of his plan to visit Ninsun, in a speech that emphasises the hero's appreciation and knowledge of his mother.

As well as acknowledging Ninsun's high status, Gilgamesh says that Ninsun's wisdom will help them to succeed. This speech is particularly important as it shows Gilgamesh's foreknowledge of the situation. Throughout the *Epic*, Gilgamesh frequently misjudges his opponents and the consequences of his actions. Indeed, the expedition for which the hero seeks his mother's blessing is heavily blighted with mistaken

assumptions—a situation that draws comment from the elders of Uruk:

You are young, Gilgameš, carried away by enthusiasm,
and the thing that you talk of you do not understand.
Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge,
his speech is fire, his breath is death.
He hears the forest's murmur for 60 leagues. He who ventures
into his forest – [feebleness will seize him!]
Who is there that would venture into his forest?

(SBV II: 289–295)

In contrast, in his four-line speech to Enkidu in Tablet III, Gilgamesh shows foresight, understanding, and sense.

Come, my friend, let us go to Egal-mah,
Into the presence of the great Queen Ninsun!
Ninsun is clever, she is wise, she knows everything,
She will set in place for our feet tracks of (good) counsel.

(SBV III: 15–18)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel “hand in hand” to meet Ninsun, a gesture used in several versions of the narrative that communicates the closeness between the pair. Gilgamesh then reveals to his mother his plan to fight with Humbaba.

The speech of Gilgamesh to Ninsun is essentially a repeated version of the speech from Tablet II, where the hero asks the blessings of the elders. Interestingly, following the speech to the elders, Enkidu attempts to persuade the elders not to give their blessing, but rather to dissuade Gilgamesh from his dangerous plan.

Although this section is broken in the Standard Version, the elders do seem to warn Gilgamesh of the dangers involved in his planned quest—and the usefulness of keeping Enkidu in front of him to guard his path! Perhaps on account of this advice, or due to his different relationship with Ninsun, Enkidu does not try to influence Gilgamesh's mother.

The text describes Ninsun listening to the words of Gilgamesh, and also to Enkidu, although there is no speech recorded from Enkidu. The narrative structure foregrounds the increasing closeness of Gilgamesh and Enkidu through juxtaposition. In the request to the elders, Gilgamesh and Enkidu both speak, but their requests to the elders are in opposition with one another—Gilgamesh wants assistance to go on

his dangerous quest, and Enkidu wants help to prevent Gilgamesh from going. The speech from the elders charging Enkidu with Gilgamesh's protection seems to cause the goals of the heroic pair to become aligned, and by the time they visit Ninsun, Gilgamesh speaks for both of them, and Enkidu's attitude towards the expedition has become more positive.

Ninsun responds to Gilgamesh's speech with actions rather than words. She is described listening to her son "in sorrow," before preparing herself to make a sacrifice to Shamash (*Gilgamesh*, SBV III: 35). While in a sense Ninsun is following through on Gilgamesh's request for her blessing, she amplifies the potential for divine protection by appealing to Shamash and his wife Aya to watch over Gilgamesh. Ninsun's prayer to Shamash has been noted in scholarship for its effectiveness in gaining the solar deity's support, with some suggesting Ninsun uses emotional manipulation to ensure Shamash's support. In her actions to safeguard her son, Ninsun reflects the protective aspect of maternal love which is an important aspect of her broader characterisation in Mesopotamian literature, particularly in royal hymns.

Following her supplications, Ninsun moves to the next step in her preparation for Gilgamesh's safe return: she adopts Enkidu. This development in the narrative has been considered in [Chapter 3](#), but it is worth noting that as well as trusting Enkidu with Gilgamesh's protection, Ninsun also asks that Gilgamesh treat Enkidu kindly. Ninsun's request for Gilgamesh to treat Enkidu favourably is given in the style of a blessing, with the same use of the imperative form of the Akkadian used in her speech to Shamash.

The lady vanishes?

It is clear that Ninsun plays a pivotal role in the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh in the first three tablets of the Akkadian versions of the *Epic*. Yet, Ninsun's presence in the narrative is not evenly distributed. Ninsun plays an active role in the sequence of events at the beginning of the narrative, but is then conspicuously absent for most of the remaining narrative. Ninsun's disappearance is not explained nor commented upon in the text.

In the Standard Babylonian Version, Ninsun's last active contribution is her adoption of Enkidu. This adoption is a crucial event in *Gilgamesh*, and performs several narrative functions. The

adoption grants greater legitimacy to Enkidu, and changes the relationships between Ninsun, Enkidu, and Gilgamesh. The bonds between Gilgamesh and Enkidu are enhanced by the adoption, and Ninsun's maternal role is expanded and emphasised.

The disappearance of Ninsun from the events of the narrative facilitates a change in Gilgamesh's character. Instead of going to his mother for help before embarking on his quest for immortality, he sets out in Tablet IX ostensibly without seeking a blessing or counsel from the elders or Ninsun. In place of asking Ninsun for help interpreting dreams, Gilgamesh trusts this duty to Enkidu in Tablet IV, and following Enkidu's death, he ceases to seek help understanding his dreams. This is shown at the start of Tablet IX, where Gilgamesh has a dream of a dangerous encounter with lions, but does not attempt to find help with its interpretation. Ninsun's absence following the death of Enkidu is considered further in [Chapter 6](#).

As well as allowing Gilgamesh to interact more directly with the divine world, Ninsun's absence highlights the importance of Gilgamesh's heroic deeds in shaping his character. The young king's role in killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven are crucial to his identity later in the narrative, as well as in the broader traditions relating to Gilgamesh, and the separation of the hero from his mother allows for a greater emphasis on his deeds and his personal divine connections.

Children

Gilgamesh's parents play a crucial role in his development and identity. The prominent role of parental figures, and the importance of themes of legitimacy and succession, in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* lead to consideration of relations between parents and children more broadly.

Not a great deal has been written on children in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (although there are some exceptions to this trend, see especially Harris, 2000), perhaps reflecting the lack of an overt focus on children in the narrative. However, the narrative themes of kingship and succession, humanity, mortality, family, and love mean the topic of children is at least subtly present in *Gilgamesh*, and worthy of consideration. While Gilgamesh's quest for a lasting name and immortality leads him to the ends of the earth, it is possible that a

simpler solution to his concerns over the ephemeral nature of the human condition may have been within reach much closer to home.

In several traditions relating to Gilgamesh, children (or descendants) play a critical role in the “after-life” of their parents, and in the preservation of the parents’ memory. The significant role of children or descendants in preserving the memory of family members is foregrounded at several points in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Outside of epic literature, children and ancestral relationships were also related to Gilgamesh, in his role as a Netherworld deity. In ritual poetry directed towards family ghosts, Gilgamesh is asked to intervene between an offerer and his ancestors “asleep in the Netherworld,” so that the offerer might be free from affliction (Foster, 2005b: 658). In prayers, Shamash and Gilgamesh together are requested to give a judgement acknowledging the appropriate mourning behaviours of the supplicant towards their “progenitors in the grave,” including parents, grandparents, and siblings. Gilgamesh played a key role in maintaining this vital relationship; as George has noted, it was through Gilgamesh’s permission that deceased ancestors would be able to partake in the offerings that were made to them, and he was also associated with the institution of the appropriate rites of commemoration (2003: 124).

Parents and children in Gilgamesh

As with chthonic traditions, in narrative literature relating to Gilgamesh, the connection between parents and children is shown to be an intimate bond which contains a sense of reciprocity. Of course, not all relationships between parents and children are equal, as we have seen, for example, Gilgamesh’s elite parentage grants him a particularly high social currency. Similarly, the depiction of the underworld in Tablet XII of the *Epic* (also the Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*) gives emphasis to the potential variations in parental status and social standing.

In the final tablet of the *Epic*, a larger number of descendants translated into a superior experience of the ongoing “life” in the Netherworld for the deceased, than for those with fewer children. The relations between parents and children in the afterlife show the quality of reciprocity that is common with familial ties. Appropriate mourning behaviours helped to ensure a more “positive” experience of death for the deceased, whereas a poorly mourned ancestor could become a malevolent ghost (Cooper, 2013). Cooper observes that

reproductive success seems to have been more significant for the continuing after-life of a deceased person than any particular moral qualities (2013: 31), with the likely exception of religious piety.

The relationships between parents and children, as shown earlier, are a dominant theme in several literary incarnations of Gilgamesh's narrative. As noted in [Chapter 3](#), the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's fight against Humbaba as described in Sumerian myth and Akkadian literature contains a trope involving the presence and absence of parental care. This is demonstrated in the discussion of the parentage of the story's three actors, but also in the imagery of the narrative.

Humbaba's auras of terror are likened to his children through the analogy of a mother or father bird and their chicks (the Akkadian for bird is usually masculine but it is likely the analogy could refer to either gender of bird). As the auras escape into the wood, Enkidu gives advice to Gilgamesh, seemingly suggesting the auras will not travel far from the forest guardian:

My friend, catch a bird and where will its chicks go?

Let us look for the auras later,

As the chicks run here and there in the wood!

(George, 2003, OB *Gilgamesh* Ischali lines 15–17)

The city of Uruk is described as the “mother” who bore Gilgamesh, where in contrast Humbaba gives his “mother” as a cave (*Gilgamesh and Humbaba B*).

The relationship between parents and children was also embedded in Mesopotamian religion. The analogy of the connection between parents and their children helped define the hierarchical structure of human and divine relations, with deities being identified as parental figures “par excellence” (Harris, 2000). The capacity of the parental figure to provide guidance, as Harris notes, is an important part of the parent/child relationship in Mesopotamia, as well as the marginality of the child (2000).

The provision of guidance is similarly an important feature of human familial relationships and divine relationships, which anthropomorphically mirror the social structure of the human family. In *Gilgamesh*, the presentation of divine relationships through familial imagery can be seen in the relationship between Ishtar and Anu, with Anu attempting (with limited success) to provide Ishtar with guidance, and Ishtar approaching the sky deity for advice and support.

There are numerous interactions between family members in

Gilgamesh, and while not the focus of a great deal of the narrative, children play an important yet nebulous role in the narrative. The role of progeny particularly in providing meaning for life (*Gilgamesh* OB VA+BM lines 6–15), and sustaining “life” in the Netherworld following death raises questions over Gilgamesh’s characterisation.

Despite Gilgamesh’s concern for lasting fame and continuing existence (and the fate of those in the Netherworld), the young king is only very infrequently presented inhabiting a parental role. Indeed, as Jacobsen has observed, Gilgamesh’s impetuous nature seems to emphasise his youth and immaturity (1976: 218). Famke lightly describes Gilgamesh’s characterisation as a “jugendlicher und hyperaktiver” ruler (2017: 2).

References to Gilgamesh’s wives and children are made in the *Death of Gilgamesh*, where they are depicted helping with his transition to the realm of the dead. In this story, family members, along with Enkidu, are described welcoming Gilgamesh into the Netherworld. Parenthood is one of the means suggested by Siduri for Gilgamesh to give meaning to his life in the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic*, with the hero being urged to care for his children (theoretical or otherwise). The use of maternal imagery is also one of the ways in which Gilgamesh is described as mourning over Enkidu.

Several features of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may generate an expectation in the audience for the creation of heroic progeny to claim greater territory in the narrative. There is a great deal of sexual activity in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the hyper-masculinity that is at times displayed by the heroes may have carried an expectation of an enhanced capacity to produce many children; as Peled notes, the creation of progeny was an important part of defining masculinity (2016: 162).

The fruitless sexual activity in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has not gone unnoticed by modern scholars. Walls has observed that the depiction of sexual relations in *Gilgamesh* is striking in its focus on sex as a pleasurable occupation, rather than as an efficient means of procreation (2001: 33). This unusual emphasis is also noted by Leick, who observes that in Mesopotamian mythology, male sexual activity was traditionally considered in terms of reproductive efficiency, and sexual pleasure is associated with female lovers (2008: 125, see also Budin, 2015: 2).

In the *Etana Epic*, the legendary king Etana travels beyond the earthly realm to the heavens, to find a special herb which might cure his barrenness. This storyline from the *Etana Epic* contrasts with

Gilgamesh's journey to find the *amurdinnu* plant, and demonstrates the importance of finding an heir for legendary figures. In his analysis of the *Etana Epic*, Haul observes the efforts of both heroes to find a botanical remedy to the problem of death and the importance of securing a lasting legacy (2000: 17–18), and notes the different approaches of Gilgamesh and Etana (2000: 45). While Gilgamesh's solution focuses on prolonging his own life indefinitely, Etana seeks a lasting dynasty (Haul, 2000: 45).

Instead of producing numerous children, the emphasis in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is on the hero's deeds, his role as king and his divine connections as potential means to providing a lasting legacy. Gilgamesh's acquisition of wisdom and fame take precedence in the narrative over the initiation of a familial dynasty.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh

Enkidu and Gilgamesh: reception

A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to considering the nature of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, particularly in terms of whether it should be considered a romantic and sexual love, or the love between two friends. These considerations are of critical importance to understanding the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu forms the basis of the plot of the first half of the narrative, and then the loss of this relationship sets in motion the journey of the second half. Also, Gilgamesh's love for Enkidu forms a crucial element of the king's inner life, his characterisation, motivation, and his development.

In this chapter, various interpretations of the relationship are considered, but it is worth noting that the diversity in scholarly responses to the epic "friendship" reflect the subtlety and ambiguity of the text. The bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is complex and encompasses different types of love; the relationship between the two heroes is elucidated using the imagery of friendship, brotherhood, marriage, and widowhood. The authors of the narrative employ a variety of imagery and descriptive techniques to outline the richness and uniqueness of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Due to this complexity, it may perhaps be reductive to attempt to enforce one interpretation or label the bond between the heroes in this chapter. The aim here is to explore the complexities and subtleties of the heroes' bond, particularly in light of how they reflect upon the

character of Gilgamesh. It remains important, however, to acknowledge the significance of the questions surrounding the sexuality of the two heroes, both in terms of their relevance to modern scholarly and popular discourse, and the presentation of the relationship between the pair in the ancient evidence.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu

The love of Enkidu and Gilgamesh is expressed through many analogies in the *Epic*; Enkidu is described by Gilgamesh, and by his mother, Ninsun, as being like an axe at his side. It is Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, who first explains to the hero the significant relationship he will have with Enkidu, saying:

You (Gilgamesh) will love him like a wife, and will caress and embrace him,

And I, I shall make him your equal.

A mighty companion will come to you, the saviour of (his) friend:

he is the mightiest in the land, he has strength,

his strength is as mighty as a lump of rock from the sky.

(SBV I: 289–293)

Ninsun's interpretation of the dream is considered further later in this chapter, but the involvement of Ninsun in the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is worthy of note. Ninsun observes the reciprocity of the transformative capacity of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's love, and she also predicts her own role in legitimising Gilgamesh's love. Ninsun's prediction of the significance of Enkidu to her son, and her adoption of Enkidu, affords her an active role in the development of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship.

The bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has a depth and complexity that defies easy classification. Both characters are transformed through their connection with one another, and they are joined in a loving bond that persists even beyond death. Scholars have long noted the closeness of the heroes' bond, and compared them to great heroic companions of the Classical world.

It was Jacobsen, in his book *The Treasures of Darkness* (1976), who first raised awareness of a romantic aspect to the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Jacobsen had noted the potential for same-sex intercourse between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in his earlier work "How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?" (1930). In his article, Jacobsen

observed the potential for anachronisms in considering how the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu might have been received by its original audience. Despite his awareness of the limits of the evidence, Jacobsen showed the absence of a partner who could match Gilgamesh's stamina motivated the creation of Enkidu, who shares the king's superphysical abilities—as evidenced by Enkidu's week of copulation with Shamhat (Jacobsen, 1930: 72). Jacobsen also noted the possibility of bisexuality as a marker of superior strength in parts of ancient Mesopotamian history (1930: 74).

The inadequacies and anachronisms involved in attempting to capture issues around gender and sexuality in ancient Mesopotamian literature using modern Western terminology and parameters have been well recognised in modern scholarship. Yet, the consideration of sexual components to Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship in the *Epic* is sufficiently valuable that problems of interpretation and reception should not prevent their academic exploration.

Recognising the presence of same-sex love and “bisexuality” in some of the world's oldest literature is important for reasserting the complex ways the text presents the love between the heroes. Similarly, this recognition holds further significance for modern day considerations surrounding gender equality and LGBTI rights. Exploring representations of homoeroticism in ancient literature has the potential to provide greater balance to a cultural heritage that is predominantly heteronormative. By acknowledging the multifaceted presentations of sexuality and gender in ancient literature, modern day discourses surrounding these issues may also be enriched.

With these considerations in mind, it is not surprising that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has had a lively reception in queer literature. The passionate relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh has inspired numerous literary works in the modern day, gaining momentum as a literary trope in the 1960s through the influence of the gay rights movement on changing social attitudes. The reception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in queer literature has been explored in Ziolkowski (2011), who affirms the high status of *Gilgamesh* in works of English and German queer literature.

An excerpt from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the opening text in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature* (also noted in Ziolkowski, 2011: 94), where it is described as the earliest known text to present the celebration of loving and intimate friendship between men (Fone, 1998: 3). Enkidu and Gilgamesh's connection is compared to the intimate relationship between Homer's Achilles and Patroclus, and the

biblical figures of David and Jonathan (1998: 3), reflecting a broader trend in the scholarly reception of the pairing (see the excellent analysis of Smith, 2014, which also includes Ugaritic poetry).

Scholarly approaches to the homosexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu have explored the complexities of the bond and possible wider cultural implications for this early example of a same-sex love affair (see Cooper, 2002). Many academic approaches have involved a transcultural element of comparison, as can be seen in Ackerman's pivotal work *When Heroes Love* (2005), and Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and other essays on Greek love* (1990).

Equality, origins, and contrasts

The sexual closeness of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is in some measure related to their identification as warrior heroes, as part of an ancient trope of heroic pairs sharing intimate homoerotic bonds (Smith, 2014). As well as this, the pair's intimate connection drives the first half of the Gilgamesh narrative; it is a bond that is expressed with plurality and nuance, capable of shifting and deepening, and causing change in the heroic characters.

While Enkidu and Gilgamesh are both portrayed as having heroic strength and enacting great deeds, in many ways, they are not equals. Enkidu, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#), is an orphan, and a “wild man.” Gilgamesh's parentage, in contrast, makes him quasi-divine and noble. Throughout the pair's relationship in the *Epic*, there is a subtle tension in terms of equity—although Enkidu can never entirely match up to Gilgamesh, he is better suited than other mortals to provide him with heroic companionship. The character of Enkidu is frequently contrasted against Gilgamesh in the narrative; he provides an alternative embodiment of the “hero,” but one without the accompanying political, social, and religious baggage of kingship.

The question of equality is first raised before Enkidu is created in Tablet I by the Mesopotamian deities, to provide Gilgamesh with a rival. Anu hears the people of Uruk complaining of Gilgamesh's “fierce arrogance,” and they further state that Gilgamesh “has not any equal.”

Anu then summons the mother goddess, Aruru, and instructs her to create Enkidu:

You, O Aruru, created [man:]
Now create what he suggests!
Let him be equal to the storm of his heart,

Let them rival each other and so let Uruk be rested.

(SBV I: 95–98)

Enkidu is created, and given a detailed description in the narrative:

In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero,
An offspring of silence, knit strong by Ninurta.
All his body is matted with hair,
He is adorned with tresses like a woman,
The locks of his hair grow as thickly as Nissaba's,
He knows not at all a people, nor even a country.

(SBV I: 103–108)

Although this initial description of Enkidu does not explicitly mention Gilgamesh, it seems clear that the king of Uruk is being used as a point of reference in delineating the qualities of the man created to oppose him. Enkidu's wild genesis is noted in the first two lines of the description—George plausibly suggests that the “*offspring of silence*” is a reference to Enkidu not being born of a human mother, and without a mother's cries (2003: 450).

At the same time, Enkidu's status as a “hero” is clearly expressed, along with his divinely-gifted strength. These two lines place Enkidu in a clear contrast with Gilgamesh—while he is unlike the king in terms of his birth status, he is similar in strength and heroism (this likeness is considered by Hawthorn to reflect Enkidu's status as Gilgamesh's “double,” 2015).

The comparison is presented again in the next few lines; Enkidu has long, thick hair similar to Nissaba (the Sumerian goddess of writing), a description also given to Gilgamesh earlier in the same tablet (SBV I: 60). Unlike Gilgamesh, however, Enkidu has no family, or a city to rule over. Enkidu's creation in the narrative is motivated by the desire to provide Gilgamesh with a rival and companion, and from the point of his creation, he is presented in contrast to the king of Uruk. In many ways, Enkidu is overshadowed and dominated by his royal companion from his inception.

Enkidu's first impulse when he hears of Gilgamesh from Shamhat is to compare their strength. He tells Shamhat that he will challenge Gilgamesh, and proclaim himself to be the mightiest. Shamhat urges against this plan, warning Enkidu that Gilgamesh “has a strength more mighty than (Enkidu)” (SBV I: 238). She further warns Enkidu that Gilgamesh is loved and favoured by the deities—a significant

difference between the two heroes with continuing narrative relevance.

Shamhat then gives Enkidu an example of how Gilgamesh is protected by the gods: he will be warned of Enkidu's arrival in dreams.

...as for Gilgameš, Šamaš loves him.

Anu, Enlil and Ea broadened his wisdom:

Even before you came from the uplands,

Gilgameš in Uruk was having dreams about you.

(SBV I: 241–244)

The prophetic dreams sent to Gilgamesh are then described. The two dreams sent to Gilgamesh are thick with imagery and metaphors, and Gilgamesh requires the help of his mother to understand them. Enkidu is represented in the dreams as a meteorite, and as an axe, both descriptions which are employed elsewhere in the narrative. The choice of imagery representing Enkidu is generally thought to inform on the nature of the heroes' relationship, with Kilmer famously drawing out wordplay related to a sexual relationship (1982: 128–132). More recently, scholarship has drawn attention to the allusions involving the transformation of a powerful, raw material (the meteor) into a reliable tool to be used by the hero (the axe). If considered in this light, the meteor and the axe may foreshadow Enkidu's transformation, through his relationship with Gilgamesh.

The dreams and their interpretation are a critical aspect of the poetic shaping of Enkidu and Gilgamesh's relationship, and a repeated feature of the dreams is the action of Ninsun's mother in making Enkidu the "equal" of Gilgamesh:

[I loved] (the meteorite, representing Enkidu) like a wife and I
caressed and embraced it,

[and you (Ninsun)], you made it my equal.

(SBV I: 284–285)

Before the pair meet, the purpose of creating Enkidu is expressed, and then following his creation, Gilgamesh's mother explains the nature of their bond—speaking to both the king of Uruk, and to the audience of the *Epic*. Ninsun's authority in deciphering dreams is emphasised in the narrative, she is described in terms of her intellectual capacity:

[The mother of Gilgameš] was clever, she was wise,
She knew everything, she said to her son;
[Wild-Cow] Ninsun was clever, she was wise,
She knew everything ...

(SBV I: 259–260)

This description of Ninsun is repeated before the account of the second dream, and when considered in conjunction with the parallelism of the lines describing Ninsun's cleverness, it appears that the poem's author is providing special emphasis on the authority of Ninsun as a dream interpreter, and as a source of wisdom.

Ninsun repeats Gilgamesh's claim that she will make Enkidu her son's "equal," and declares the dreams to be favourable. She also expands on the nature and significance of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu:

My son, the axe you saw is a man,
You will love him like a wife, and will caress and embrace him,
And I, I shall make him your equal.

A mighty companion will come to you, the saviour of (his)
friend:

He is the mightiest in the land, he has strength,
His strength is as mighty as a lump of rock in the sky.

(SBV I: 288–293)

The dream analysis by Ninsun emphasises two prominent aspects of Enkidu and Gilgamesh's relationship in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: they are both presented as mighty heroes, and they share a deep, loving bond. Ninsun's promise to make Enkidu Gilgamesh's "equal" is clearly related to his social status as an orphan, and to the relationship between the two heroes—as Ninsun makes clear, Enkidu is already Gilgamesh's "equal" in terms of his heroic strength. By juxtaposing the two heroes in terms of their physical "equality" and their social inequality, the uniqueness and importance of Gilgamesh's social privilege is emphasised.

Gilgamesh and Pygmalion

The emphasis given in the dreams to transformation informs on the nature of the bond between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. The connection between the pair alters the behaviour and characterisation of both heroes. Smith has recently explored the loving bonds between several

heroic pairs from ancient narratives involving warrior culture (2014). Through comparing the biblical pair of David and Jonathan, Homer's Achilles and Patrokles and Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Smith gives a thoughtful analysis of the complex literary portrayals of love between warriors in the ancient world. Smith argues that, in the earlier-mentioned heroic pairings, it is the "slightly lesser" hero who more greatly influences the development of the "slightly greater" hero (2014).

Smith's argument is entirely more nuanced than this encapsulation may suggest, but what is significant here is noting the reciprocity of the transformative capacity of the bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Enkidu is created to change Gilgamesh's behaviour, and in his prophetic dreams, Enkidu's transformation is predicted along with his capacity to change Gilgamesh, and bring him love.

The relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu involves not a single reciprocal transformation, but a series of changes apparent at multiple levels of the text. The most obvious and dramatic "transformation" is Enkidu's genesis from clay:

Aruru washed her hands,
She took a pinch of clay, she threw it down in the wild.
In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero.

(SBV I: 101–103)

This aspect of the love story between Gilgamesh and Enkidu shares numerous parallels with the story of Pygmalion from Classical literature. The familiar story of Pygmalion is best known from Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, written around 8 CE.

In Ovid's story, the king of Cyprus falls in love with a statue he has carved (in later traditions, the statue is named Galatea). Like Gilgamesh, Pygmalion has a strained relationship with women. While Gilgamesh's tyranny places him at odds with the women of Uruk, Pygmalion shuns women, and neither king shows much interest in marriage. The behaviour of both characters can be viewed as holding the potential to draw divine anger: Gilgamesh's behaviour results in complaints from his subjects to the city's deities, and by rejecting love, Pygmalion risks the anger of the love deity, Venus. For both figures, where the audience might expect divine punishment, there is instead a "reward," in the divine gift of a lover—one who has been especially crafted for the king.

Pygmalion finds the statue he has created physically enticing; he is

described kissing and caressing it, and placing it as his companion in bed. The treatment of the statue by Pygmalion, prior to meeting its live incarnation, recalls the dreams of Gilgamesh about Enkidu before their meeting. In the dreams, which Gilgamesh describes to his mother, he is described as loving the “lump of rock” representing Enkidu, treating it like a wife, and caressing and embracing it. Both narratives involve the loving caress of inanimate objects, and the objects will become animate for the benefit of the lover, through divine intervention.

Of course, there are many differences between the two accounts. For example, the two goddesses who give life to the clay/rock characters inhabit different traditions and roles, and Enkidu’s genesis is partially attributed to the inspiration of Anu (or Enlil). It is interesting to observe, however, that when the two stories of the divine creation of a royal companion are considered alongside one another, the intimacy and romance of the storyline in both texts is emphasised.

The story of Pygmalion and the statue is not alone in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in containing stories with parallels to the narratives of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The most striking similarity in the two compositions is the presence of a Flood narrative in both works. In *Gilgamesh*, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), this occurs in Tablet XI when Gilgamesh visits the Flood survivors. In Book I of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid presents the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, involving a divinely engineered Flood that destroys most of humanity, except for the two protagonists, who escape in a boat.

The similarities and differences in the two Flood narratives, in two distinct literary works arising from culturally and temporally diverse civilisations, has been noted in modern scholarship. Ovid’s reputation as a voraciously erudite collector of myths makes drawing clear lines of influence particularly challenging (Fletcher, 2010: 212). Despite the difficulties of breaching such vast historical and cultural divides, attempts have been made to consider possible connections between Ovid’s work and earlier Semitic myths and epics. The Semitic Flood narratives are thought by West to be at least indirectly influential in Ovid’s account of the Flood in *Metamorphoses* (West, 1997: 493).

Moran also considered the possibility of Ovid’s awareness, and use of, the tradition surrounding Enkidu’s genesis and civilisation (1991). While Moran concedes there are “no grounds for postulating a lost Alexandrian Enkidu known to Ovid and his model for the power of love,” he does allow for Ovid’s awareness of traditions involving

primitive “man” to have influenced his work, and for these traditions to include versions of the Enkidu story (1991).

The name “Pygmalion” is thought to have Eastern origins, being derivative of the name of the Phoenician deity Pumai, whose name is attested in Carthage, Sardinia, and Cyprus (Reed, 2007: 77). Cyprus was a well-known passage for the transmission of cultural ideas in the ancient world, and it seems plausible (though difficult to prove) that the story of Pygmalion brought together numerous Eastern traditions, including echoes of Mesopotamian epic. The likely linking of the two Flood traditions gives further support for the suggestion of a cross-cultural connection between the story of Pygmalion, and the creation of Enkidu.

Transformation in ancient narrative literature

Although it is likely impossible to prove a direct connection between Pygmalion and Gilgamesh, the contrast is useful to emphasise the transformative capacity of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The connection with Enkidu drives the development of Gilgamesh’s identity and changes his characterisation as a king.

The ability of the love between the heroes to profoundly change them is at the heart of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and supports the interpretation of the heroes’ bond as “true” love. Although perhaps not a phrase frequently employed in academic terminologies, in describing Enkidu as Gilgamesh’s “true love,” what is meant is that the relationship is the hero’s primary non-familial bond: that is to say, in the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu is Gilgamesh’s “significant other” (see Leick’s conception of the “Other,” 2003: 268). This interpretation gives weight to the complexity of the relationship, without needing to circumscribe the connection with labels such as “friend,” “lover,” or “brother.” All of these categories are, in a sense, accurate for describing parts of the love between the heroes, but none adequately elucidates the depth of the connection.

The identification of Enkidu as Gilgamesh’s “significant other” is supported by the heroes’ interaction with Ishtar in Tablet VI of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic* (Leick, 2003: 268). The goddess’ proposal in Tablet VI provides the potential for Enkidu to be replaced as Gilgamesh’s primary “love.” Gilgamesh’s blunt rejection and Enkidu’s angry threats towards the deity swiftly negate the

possibility of Enkidu being supplanted in Gilgamesh's affections. While love offered by the goddess is not consubstantial with the love between the heroes, it is comparable in the sense that Ishtar offers a non-familial love that is transformative in nature. Indeed, it is precisely the transformative capacity of Ishtar's love that is feared by Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh's long speech of rejection in response to Ishtar's marriage proposal can be divided into three sections: lines 24–32 (1), lines 33–41 (2) and lines 42–79 (3) (Abusch, 1986: 145). In section one, Gilgamesh describes the bridal gifts he would give to Ishtar if he was to marry her, and in the second section, he draws unflattering parallels between the deity and several objects—all of which behave contrary to their expected function. In the final and most lengthy section, Gilgamesh gives a drawn-out account of Ishtar's romantic history.

For each of the goddess' past lovers, Gilgamesh describes the unhappy consequences that have resulted from the affections of the goddess. Dumuzi's death is alluded to through the mention of mourning, and the animal lovers (the *allallu*-bird, the lion and the horse) are all listed as experiencing negative changes in their bodies or their environment (or both). Finally, Gilgamesh condemns Ishtar for her transformation of her human "lovers," the shepherd (who is turned into a wolf) and Ishullanu (possibly a dwarf, see Volk, 1995: 207). Gilgamesh then concludes with the statement:

And you would love me and [change me] as (you did) them?
(SBV VI: 79)

Both Gilgamesh and Ishtar are presented as aware of the transformative capacity of her love—Ishtar's promises of wealth and bounty suggest an improvement in status. Yet Gilgamesh is not willing to be transformed by the goddess of love, and rejects her harshly.

Love and transformation

"Romantic" love, involving affection and intimacy between non-family members with a physical component, is connected in Mesopotamian literature with marriage, both in human unions and divine ones. Love between a courting pair could lead to fast changes in social status; a person might move from being identified as a son or daughter to a husband or wife, to a mother or father and possibly to a widow or

widower. The historical reality of arranged marriages does not preclude the presence of love from a union, as imagery related to love and intimacy are a common feature of literary texts depicting marital unions. In this way, the love between two people could be viewed as possessing a powerful capacity for transformation, and this ability to transform is a significant part of the connection between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu both change through their relationship with one another. As previously noted, Gilgamesh engineers Enkidu's change from innocent wildling to knowing companion. The change in Enkidu's nature is perhaps most overtly shown in his relationship with animals.

In an insightful article contrasting wild and human nature in *Gilgamesh*, Barron notes that Enkidu's increasingly violent relationship with the natural world demonstrates the transformation in his character (2002). Prior to his meeting with Shamhat and Gilgamesh, Enkidu is at home in the wild, and his origins and close relationship with the wilderness are emphasised through repetition in Tablet I. Enkidu's first companions are animals, and he is presented as working to protect their welfare.

Enkidu's commitment to protecting animals is reflected in the language of the trapper's speech, where he describes Enkidu's efforts to free animals caught in traps. The verb used to describe the freeing of the animals in lines SBV I: 131–132 might be translated as reflecting a repeated action, showing Enkidu's behaviour in rescuing his wild companions to be a matter of habit. Gilgamesh, however, sets a "trap" for Enkidu using Shamhat as "bait," and there is no one to spring the wild man from Shamhat's tight embrace. Initially, Enkidu desires to return to his herd, but they move away from him and he becomes lonely.

While this transformation takes place prior to Enkidu's first meeting with Gilgamesh, it is Gilgamesh's influence that creates the change, as events proceed exactly as the young king had predicted. As the narrative progresses, Enkidu's companionship with Gilgamesh involves continual conflict with nature. This conflict can be seen in the cutting down of trees and killing of the Forest Guardian in Tablet V, and the slaughter of the Bull of Heaven in Tablet VI. In assisting Gilgamesh to kill the Bull, Barron notes Enkidu's vicious attack on an animal; creatures which he once protected and freed from the hunter's traps are now at risk from him (2002: 390–391). The change in Enkidu's behaviour towards animals is significant, with Barron

suggesting Enkidu risks a dissociation with his fundamental nature that borders on self-annihilation (2002). It is worth noting that Enkidu still pines for his home and his state of innocence in the wilderness on his deathbed, suggesting the changes in his nature have not resulted in a complete disconnection with his former identity.

The conflict in Enkidu's nature was notably explored by Jung, who viewed the character of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as personifying the tension between cultural development and untamed savagery (Jung, 1967). The Jungian view holds that it is Enkidu's rejection of his unconscious, wild nature which causes his increasingly violent behaviour, as in response to its near-erasure through the process of civilisation, the unconscious seeks to defend itself through aggressive action (Odajnyk, 2007: 38). Considered from this viewpoint, the figures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu can both be considered as representing the tension between civilisation and wildness, humanity and animality, but the transformations of their characters irreversibly alter their identities, and involve a great deal of risk.

It is not only Enkidu's nature which experiences change through his relationship with Gilgamesh. The bond between the heroes also results in changes of social status for Enkidu. Arguably, Gilgamesh undergoes changes in status also, although these are only subtly alluded to, where Enkidu's adoption by Ninsun clearly signals his improved social standing, and increased closeness to Gilgamesh.

Although less overt, Gilgamesh's mourning in Tablet XIII evokes the change in status of a husband becoming a widow. Building on observations of Kilmer (1982) relating to wordplay in the sexual symbolism between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Harris argues that Enkidu has been presented in the role of a "wife" to Gilgamesh's "husband" (1997: 86). Although in the modern-day, same-sex relationships are more commonly described as the union of two "partners," the avoidance of gender-neutral terminology suits Harris's argument, as she sees Enkidu as depicted as "woman and wife" in his union with Gilgamesh (conversely, Leick sees Enkidu as "totally unfeminized", 2003: 268):

What is noteworthy is that the relationship between them is not simply that of male and female but that of husband and wife.

(Harris, 1997: 86)

In accepting the view that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are at least

implicitly presented as marital partners, Gilgamesh then can be observed experiencing the shadow-side of marriage at Enkidu's death. At the loss of his companion, the hero is transformed into a widow, covering the face of his dead friend "like a bride" (SBV VIII: 59).

It is not only the imagery of husband and wife used to elucidate the connection between Gilgamesh and Enkidu at the time of Enkidu's death, but also Enkidu's relationship to Gilgamesh as his friend and brother. The language of brotherhood is notably employed in the preparation for Enkidu's death in both the Standard Babylonian Version and the Hittite Version of *Gilgamesh* (noted in Smith, 2014).

In my view, the combination of imagery evolving various forms of human connection is telling. In literature describing the marital union of the goddess Inanna and the Mesopotamian king, a variety of imagery is employed—Inanna is described as the king's wife, sister, and mother (not all at the same time) (Pryke, 2017a). The use of different relationships to describe the bond between deity and king appears to speak for its depth and significance.

The employment of a variety of imagery relating to friendship, brotherhood and marital and sexual unions between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, similarly, speak to the strength and uniqueness of the connection between them. This is not to say that the loving connection between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is purely rhetorical, rather that the complexity and depth of the relationship required multiple means of expression. Gilgamesh's behaviour in the *Epic* also supports the primacy of his relationship with Enkidu, and the depth of their love.

It is of further significance to note that arguably the strongest expressions of the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu occur around the event of his death. In Tablet VIII, Gilgamesh mourns over the body of his loved one.

Tablet VIII involves a great deal of imagery relating to the funeral preparations and mourning rituals for Enkidu. It also contains one of the most heart-achingly beautiful depictions of the death of a loved one in ancient literature, where the hero tries to comprehend the enormity of his loss. Gilgamesh speaks to his friend, and notes the many adventures they have shared—again showing the connection between heroic deeds and identity in the *Epic*. He then asks Enkidu why he will not respond, and searches in vain for Enkidu's heartbeat:

(Gilgamesh speaks): 'Now what sleep is it that has seized [you]?
You have become unconscious and cannot hear [me!]'

But (Enkidu), he would not lift [his head];
He felt his heart, but it was not beating any more.

(SBV XIII: 55–58)

Gilgamesh's grief, beautifully expressed, gives a measure and a voice to his love, by showing the heart-breaking reality of his loss.

The first encounter

Having considered the nature of the bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, we return to the initial contact between the two heroes. After a lengthy prologue, Gilgamesh and Enkidu finally meet in Tablet II. The first meeting of the two heroes takes place in Uruk. Gilgamesh is hurrying on his way to a wedding, and Enkidu physically prevents Gilgamesh from entering the wedding-house.

(Enkidu) stood in the street of Uruk ...
He blocked the path [of Gilgameš] ...
A crowd was jostling before [him],
The menfolk were thronging [around him.]
They were [kissing his feet] like a little baby's.

(SBV II: 100–107)

The setting of the scene for the meeting in Tablet II, with the description of the jostling crowd surrounding Enkidu, recalls the account of the heroes' first meeting in Gilgamesh's two dreams, which he revealed to his mother:

(Gilgamesh speaks, describing the meteor representing Enkidu):
The land of Uruk was standing around [it,]
[the land was gathered] about it.
A crowd [was jostling] before [it,]
[the menfolk were] thronging around it.
They were kissing its feet [like a little] baby's.

(SBV I: 251–255)

The narrative had previously “introduced” the two heroes to one another through multiple characters and devices in Tablet I, including the description of Enkidu to Gilgamesh by the trapper, and the depiction of Gilgamesh to Enkidu by Shamhat, and the prophetic dreams. These introductions by proxy serve to heighten the anticipation in the audience for the first time that Gilgamesh and

Enkidu encounter one another directly.

The building of suspense in the narrative prior to the meeting of Gilgamesh and Enkidu emphasises the significance of the event of the pair's first meeting. The setting of the wedding-house for the first meeting is reminiscent of the marital imagery employed by Ninsun in her dream interpretations.

The repetition of language connects the first meeting of Gilgamesh and Enkidu with their earlier introductions-by-proxy. This connection further heightens the tension in the narrative, as the outcomes predicted by Shamhat and Ninsun (the "proxies"), would seem to indicate very different results for the anticipated physical contact between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Shamhat has predicted that Enkidu will be no match for Gilgamesh's strength—and Enkidu himself has vowed to challenge Gilgamesh to a test of strength. However, in the dreams she describes to Enkidu, Shamhat presents Ninsun as explaining to Gilgamesh that he will "caress and embrace" Enkidu. In the end, both predictions become true, as an initial combat between Gilgamesh and Enkidu gives way to a lasting love.

Love and loyalty

In Mesopotamia, the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu had an enduring and widespread fame. The bond between the pair was used rhetorically to express powerful feelings of love and faithfulness. A Neo-Assyrian oracle shows a prophetess sending words of encouragement from the divine to the king Assurbanipal, alluding to the relationship between the heroic pair (Parpola, 1997: 41, and Halton, 2009: 57–58).

Halton has shown that through the allusion to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the prophetess affirms the fidelity of the deity to the king (2009: 58). This example of Gilgamesh's ancient reception demonstrates the poetic power of the love between the heroes. The emphasis on loyalty in the oracle gives focus to one of the most overt and consistent aspects of Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu. For all the many battles, trials, and distance they encounter, the love between the pair is enduring and steadfast.

Conclusion

Love is a potent force in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The loving relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu shapes the dual arcs of their

narratives. The maternal love that Ninsun has for her son, Gilgamesh, is comparable only to the hero's bond with Enkidu in terms of the intimacy of the connection between the two characters. Ninsun's love is protective and contributes to Gilgamesh's development. Most significantly, perhaps, it is through Ninsun's divinity that Gilgamesh will finally receive an elevated role in the afterlife. Both the familial love and the love of Enkidu are significant forces in shaping Gilgamesh's identity—but in different ways. The love of Gilgamesh's mother is a legitimising love that affords the king power, status and divine connections. The love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in contrast, is a transformative love for both heroes.

The loving relationships in *Gilgamesh* allow for consideration of the connection between intimate relationships and identity in literary characterisations. Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar, the goddess of love, and at times shows a similar lack of care for the sustenance of his personal relationships. He is, in some versions, dismissive of his mother, and his interactions with Enkidu ultimately end in his companion's destruction. Gilgamesh is not presented as loving "perfectly," but he is shown to love deeply. At the end of his adventures, Gilgamesh has grown in esteem for his home of Uruk, and the loves and losses of those closest to the hero contribute to his understanding of the world and his gaining of wisdom.



Wisdom and civilisation

The [previous chapter](#) considered role of the close relationships with those around Gilgamesh in developing his character, and how experiences of love and loss help him to gain wisdom. This chapter takes a closer look at the theme of wisdom in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh's identity and the narrative of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are shaped by the king's search for wisdom. The literary representation of wise kings had a wide currency in the Ancient Near East, and the value of this trope is easy to appreciate. The first chapter of this volume explored Gilgamesh's role as a king, and showed how the Mesopotamian institution of kingship united serious religious, social, and political responsibilities. In a cultural environment where power was centralised around a human figure, one envisaged as holding superphysical capabilities and resources, it would seem desirable for that individual to possess a high level of intelligence and reason.

In the introduction of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the narrator describes the young king:

[He who saw the Deep, the] foundation of the country,
[who] knew ... [...] was wise in everything! ...

He [learnt] the totality of wisdom about everything.

(*Gilgamesh*, SBV I: 1–2, 6)

As George notes in his commentary on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the theme of wisdom in the *Epic* is foregrounded by the famous opening words of the Standard Version “*sha naqba imuru*.” This phrase is translated “he who saw the deep” (2003: 444), and was a commonly used name for the composition. The incipit of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Gilgamesh* narrative differs from the older Babylonian version which begins with the line “surpassing all other kings.”

The “Deep” from the opening lines raises the topic of wisdom, and can be translated in multiple ways. The Akkadian verb “*naqābu*”

provides the root of the word. This rare verb means “to be deep,” and in its primary form can mean either “totality” or the deep body of underground water known as the Apsu, domain of the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, Ea (Sumerian Enki) (George, 2003: 444). Either translation supports the early presentation of the hero as a character of uncommon wisdom. While Gilgamesh journeyed to the depths of Ea’s watery domain in search of the rejuvenating *amurdinnu* plant, he also developed a more holistic understanding of the world, based on his fantastic adventures. The likely possibility remains that the composers of the narrative intentionally chose the word to allow for both meanings, linking Gilgamesh’s “totality” of understanding to his “depth” of experience.

This first glimpse of the story’s protagonist presents him as a man of profound and unusual wisdom. Although some of the hero’s rather impetuous actions in the epic may raise a few eyebrows on this close association between Gilgamesh and good sense, the narrative and its hero have a prominent engagement with the theme of wisdom.

The theme of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* can be seen in the emphasis on seeking counsel (and ignoring it), divination, and the attainment of knowledge and experience. The collection of wisdom in the narrative comes at a cost, and is thematically related to the loss of innocence and the process of civilisation. Many different characters in the narrative advise Gilgamesh, from his mother to Enkidu, from Siduri to Utanapishtim. Gilgamesh’s personal wisdom grows over the course of the narrative. The attainment of wisdom is closely related to the hero’s character development, and his embodiment of the role of king.

Wisdom and knowledge were closely connected with the divine, forming part of the conceptual boundary that separated the mortal and divine spheres. Viewed in this light, Gilgamesh’s search for knowledge can be shown to be conclusively intertwined with his pursuit of immortality and fame. Gilgamesh’s final voyage in the *Epic* is a quest for knowledge, with the success or failure of this quest presented with some ambiguity in the text.

Wisdom in Mesopotamia

The study of wisdom in Mesopotamia is a developing field. As well as fuelling academic discourse in the modern day, it is probable that the nature of “wisdom” was a contested topic in the ancient world—indeed, questions over the nature of wisdom are at the heart of the

wisdom literature “genre.” As a subject, the topic of wisdom in Mesopotamia is sufficiently wide-ranging to preclude its detailed consideration in this chapter. In this [chapter](#), I use the terms “Mesopotamian wisdom traditions” and “Mesopotamian wisdom literature” as terms of convenience, but this is not intended to give the impression of a single well-defined tradition or genre. Even in the present day, the word “wisdom” requires a broad definition, and frequently differs with varying historical and cultural contexts. In Mesopotamia, too, the concept of “wisdom” was elucidated broadly, and the many Akkadian words relating to learning, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom reflect the multifaceted nature of the subject (Perdue, 2008: 29).

The discussion of wisdom traditions and literature in this chapter is intended to give a sense of the challenges involved in understanding ancient wisdom, and to provide some context for the consideration of wisdom in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The many difficulties surrounding issues of the production and consumption of the *Epic*, and the (somewhat ironic) limits to our understanding of “wisdom” in the ancient world makes challenging work of any attempt to view the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in a clear cultural and historical context. Through engaging with the complexities of wisdom in Mesopotamia, a greater appreciation of the sophisticated nature of the topic and the text may be developed.

Defining “wisdom”

Noting the scholarly debate around attempts to define wisdom and knowledge in Mesopotamia risks presenting the misleading sense that a clear definition in line with our modern Western thinking is at all possible. From a modern perspective, wisdom and knowledge may be presented in definite, and times binary, terms. To draw a fairly blunt comparison: modern Western civilisation often privileges the capability of wisdom and knowledge to provide certain standard responses to challenging questions. In contrast, texts relating to wisdom in the ancient world regularly appear more interested in considering the plurality that may be part of difficult questions, in place of acquiring a set of unambiguous answers.

Further, wisdom in Mesopotamia was not confined to scholarly matters, but also involved practical achievements and skills. Wisdom was not merely a matter of what was known, but could also be expressed through what was done. The narrative of *Gilgamesh* is one which promotes the high value of knowledge, culture and specialist

skills such as craftsmanship, while at the same time acknowledging the complex character of civilisation and knowledge, and the challenges involved in becoming wise.

While acknowledging the limitations around finding a precise definition of “wisdom,” this volume aims to provide a certain terminological accessibility. To facilitate this, it seems beneficial to quote the definition of wisdom given by Buccalleti, with particular reference to the Ancient Near East and Mesopotamia. Although Buccalleti’s influential article on wisdom in Mesopotamia was published in the 1980s, his definition remains useful for delineating two lines along which the topic of wisdom may be approached:

The current understanding of ‘wisdom’ may be summed up along two lines of reasoning. On the one hand, wisdom is viewed as a literary genre, characterized by certain formal traits, such as the type of composition or certain linguistic peculiarities. On the other hand, wisdom is viewed as an intellectual trend – an ideology which colors man’s appreciation of reality and embodies a certain philosophy of life, pertaining especially to ethical issues.

(1981: 35)

The first of Buccalleti’s lines of reasoning, the “genre” of wisdom literature, is considered further later in this chapter. Buccalleti’s connection of wisdom with a philosophy of life which affects the individual’s appreciation of reality is especially pertinent for the study of *Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in its many incarnations, considers a range of esoteric and philosophical observations on how life may be lived, and the possible meaning of life.

Buccalleti’s second observation that wisdom can be seen as an intellectual trend also holds special import for the subject of this chapter. While it is safe to say that the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in its various forms, is a story deeply concerned with the exploration of wisdom, the intellectual construct of wisdom is not articulated in the same way across the different versions of the narrative. Scholars have recently begun to note and explore the range of ways that *Gilgamesh*’s presentation of the nature of wisdom differs between texts.

The prominent example is the different emphases presented on the subject of wisdom in the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the Standard Babylonian Version. This has been discussed by Van der Toorn in his analysis of wisdom literature and genre, who argues that the difference across the two versions is

descriptive of a wider shift in the conception of wisdom in Mesopotamia between the second and first millennium BCE (2007). The different presentations of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* are considered later in this chapter, but it is worth noting here the capacity of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to illuminate not only Mesopotamian approaches to the subject of wisdom, but changes and variations in the understanding of this complex topic.

Wisdom literature in Mesopotamia

The heading “Mesopotamian wisdom literature” may be somewhat misleading: there is no known single wisdom literary tradition from ancient Mesopotamia. What we have instead are multiple traditions, an assortment of texts, and a wide range of historical periods and cultures. There are Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian literary texts relating to wisdom, and these texts are related to one another in complex ways. On this point, Alster has observed:

...Although Sumerian literature certainly had a strong influence on the later development of Babylonian and Assyrian literature, it would be appropriate to question whether ‘wisdom’ is to be understood in the same way for early Mesopotamian literature as for later periods ...

(2005: 18)

As noted in [Chapter 1](#), the earliest known texts of the genre broadly known as “wisdom literature” come from Sumer, and include the Sumerian-language composition *The Instructions of Shuruppak* (ETCSL 5.6.1), which covers a range of topics, from the practical to the esoteric.

Mesopotamian wisdom literature more broadly is wide-ranging, with texts providing advice that is rhetorical in nature, addressing how to speak in specific situations, as well as when to speak, and when to be silent. Across the cultures of the Ancient Near East, many debates, diatribes, disputations, and monologues have been discovered. These are often practical and situational in nature and often relate to collective memory.

When considering Mesopotamian wisdom texts, notions of genre create a kind of conceptual impasse between the modern and ancient literature. Identifying genre and classifying texts are important for modern efforts to analyse the ancient evidence. In many ways, our

understanding of genre “very much defines our understanding of an ancient text, its meaning, purpose, and importance in Mesopotamian literary history” (Cohen, 2013: 11). Yet the importance of genre in modern analyses is as much a hindrance as it is a help—viewing the ancient literature through the modern lens risks distorting our perception.

Noting the unwillingness of various Babylonian texts to align with a definite “wisdom genre,” George suggests instead the usefulness of considering the works in terms of a shared “mode” (George, 2007). In line with Longman (1991), who is credited with the term, George defines the “mode” of a work as referring to characteristics of an emotional or tonal nature that transect diverse genres or forms (2007: 53). In this way, *Gilgamesh*, along with numerous other Babylonian texts which might generally (as a kind of academic shorthand) yet imprecisely be labelled as “wisdom literature,” can be considered instead to show a shared mode. As George notes, these texts may be grouped together under the heading of “mode,” “not by virtue of formal characteristics, but because they share more a tone and philosophical attitude” (2007: 53).

For clarity, “wisdom literature” is considered here as literary works which involve a thematic concern with knowledge and instruction, containing practical and moral “truths” which hold universal relevance. This literature is more accurately described as belonging to a shared mode rather than genre. To return to the topic of *Gilgamesh* more directly, it is the philosophical attitude and the consideration of the theme of wisdom in the *Epic*, which most overtly allows for its consideration as literature composed in a broader Mesopotamian wisdom mode.

Wisdom and civilisation

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a narrative that glorifies civilisation as the pinnacle of human existence. The process of civilisation is not always smooth in the narrative, and the outcomes of civilisation are not presented in purely positive terms.

An important component of the theme of civilisation in *Gilgamesh* is the complex interplay between animality, the natural world, and civilisation (seen in [Chapter 3](#)). Although the Mesopotamian concept of civilisation most likely differed from our own, it can generally be observed that “civilisation” in *Gilgamesh* is seen as a progression,

leading from an animal state to a state of increased complexity, and the ability to form part of a cultural legacy. The *Epic* extols the products of civilisation, such as writing and building works, while at the same time, the nobility and freedom of wildness and animal creatures is often presented positively.

Enkidu's civilisation

To fulfil his destiny as Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu needs to leave his wilderness home and become more civilised. It is Gilgamesh who engineers the change in Enkidu's state of consciousness, through his advice to the hunter. The narrative mechanism for Enkidu's move from animal-like wild-man to heroic confidant is provided through the various influences of the fascinating character of Shamhat. The beauty and allure of Shamhat draws Enkidu away from his herd, and through her embrace and instruction, he develops understanding.

The coupling of Enkidu and Shamhat is perhaps one of the best-known episodes of the *Epic*, and one which has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention. Enkidu's move towards humanity and away from animality involves numerous steps. Firstly, he recognises the appeal of a member of his own species, and discovers his sexuality. He then develops the skill of speech and language, as well as understanding. Through Shamhat's influence, Enkidu also learns how to eat bread and drink beer—the products of agriculture and cultivation. He also acquires civilised (though perhaps not gender-specific) clothing. These processes prepare Enkidu for his first meeting with Gilgamesh in Tablet II.

Shamhat

Shamhat (Old Babylonian Shamkatum) is described as a *ḥarimtu* in the Standard Babylonian and Old Babylonian versions of *Gilgamesh*. The word *ḥarimtu* was once given as “prostitute” (for a definition and many usages the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, 1995), but this now seems unsuitable to adequately express the complexity of the word. Through the influence of Assante, *ḥarimtu* is now generally (but not universally) considered to mean a social class of women, who had left their ancestral homes and not all of whom were engaged in paid prostitution (Steele, 2009: 305). *Ḥarimtu* may mean different things in different contexts (see Assante, 1998: 5–96, for reference to how this term differs in the literary setting of *Gilgamesh*).

While arguing in support of the traditional interpretation of *ḫarimtu*, Cooper makes the sensible observation that using the modern word “prostitute” for *ḫarimtu* carries cultural connotations that would not align with the conception of ancient Mesopotamian position, a subject that is at best dimly understood (Cooper, 2006b: 20). It is worth noting that the blessings and curses that Enkidu issues towards Shamhat in Tablet VII seem to reflect the potential challenges that may have been faced by a prostitute in ancient Mesopotamia, such as the lack of a traditional household (SBV VII: 106, 111), and the infelicities of the tavern as a professional setting (SBV VII: 109–110). Most scholars consider Shamhat to be a prostitute (despite the lack of clear reference in the text to payment).

Prostitutes were considered to be a prime representative of urban life in Mesopotamia (Harris, 2000: 122). Through her role in guiding Enkidu through his transition towards civilisation, Shamhat presents a specific kind of knowledge and learning. She teaches Enkidu about sexuality, dresses him in clothing, introduces the products of agriculture, and describes urban life to him. Each of these areas relates to culture, and also the religious traditions of Uruk.

When Shamhat and some shepherds present Enkidu with ale and bread in a very fragmented section of Tablet II, Enkidu is still in some ways innocent:

They put bread before [him],
they put ale before him.
Enkidu did not eat the bread, he looked intently as he viewed
(it):
[how to eat bread he had never] even [been taught],
[how to drink ale Enkidu did not] know.
[The harlot said to him, to] Enkidu:
“[Eat the bread, Enkidu, the staff of the] people,
[Drink the ale, the destiny of the] land!”

(SBV II: 44–51)

In each area of acculturation, the feminine nature of Shamhat’s role in civilising Enkidu is seen. The arts of seduction were considered particularly feminine skills, a connection which forms the basis of numerous myths, including the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Hedammu*. As noted by Harris, sexuality, feminine behaviours and prostitution were listed among the cosmic *ME* in ancient Mesopotamia (1991). The *ME* were the fundamental qualities of the universe which, though difficult

to precisely define, were crucial for its functioning and regulation. Positive expressions of sexuality were an area of competence for the goddess, Ishtar, who wielded the *ME* and who enjoyed (along with many other deities) offerings of beer and cake. Indeed, in the Sumerian myth depicting the transfer of the *ME* from the control of Enki in Eridu to Inanna (Sumerian Ishtar) in Uruk, the god of wisdom offers the goddess of love beer and cake as part of his performance of the duties of a good host, and in response she applies her seductive charms to him (*Inanna and Enki*, ETCSL 1.3.1. For a summary and analysis of this myth see Pryke, 2017a).

The production of processed foods such as bread and beer was also associated with women, as noted by Stol in his detailed study on women in the Ancient Near East:

It was the task of the man to provide the raw materials for the housekeeping, the grain, the wool, and the rest. The woman's role was to process this material by grinding, baking, spinning, weaving, or some other appropriate skill.

(Stol, 2016: 339)

The production of clothing, also, was related to the feminine skill of weaving and spinning. As an interesting aside, not all female characters in Mesopotamian literature were depicted as enthusiastically embracing the domestic arts and crafts. In Sumerian love poetry, Inanna protests the very idea of spinning and weaving to prepare her marital bed (*Dumuzid-Inana A*, ETCSL 4.08.01).

The production of beer and bread were crucial to cultured Mesopotamian life. Foster notes that production of bread and beer, "the twin mainstays of the Mesopotamian diet," was an important government-sponsored activity in the Akkadian period (2016: 101), and the supply of beer and bread was also important for military activities.

Shamhat's introduction of bread, beer, clothing, and urban life extend beyond the description of her role as envisaged by Gilgamesh in Tablet I. While Shamhat's education of Enkidu is given under the instructions of other characters, she shows some autonomy in what she teaches him. Bailey observes that Shamhat, like Gilgamesh, is representative of the city of Uruk (1976: 438).

Shamhat's education of Enkidu is rooted in significant aspects of urban life, and her knowledge reflects some specialisation related to her gender. As well as educating Enkidu about aspects of urban life,

Shamhat is shown to be knowledgeable more broadly. She warns Enkidu of Gilgamesh's privileged position with Shamash, Anu, Enlil, and Ea, and she (somehow) knows that Gilgamesh has had dreams foretelling of his companion's arrival.

The religious elements surrounding Enkidu's education are worthy of note. In Tablet I, Enkidu is introduced to elements of the religious life of Uruk, such as festivals, beer, and cake, and it is clear that religion is a central part of the urban existence. At the same time, the gods are presented as partial, and this partiality does not tend in Enkidu's favour. This observation by Shamhat subtly foreshadows Enkidu's death in Tablet VII, where Enkidu is divinely chosen instead of Gilgamesh to die due to improper behaviour.

Enkidu's transition

Within the narrative framework of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, humanity, animality, and kingship are represented as part of a relative spectrum; the closer Gilgamesh comes to behaving and appearing like an animal, the further he moves away from his role as Uruk's ideal king (Pryke, 2017b).

The movement of Enkidu along this spectrum, towards civilisation, is expressed at times through the use of animals. While Enkidu had been part of a herd, sharing the animals' food and protecting them from harm, following the development of his more human qualities, he becomes estranged from animals, and a danger to them.

(Enkidu) turned his face toward his herd.

The gazelles saw Enkidu and they started running,
the animals of the wild moved away from his person.

Enkidu had defiled his body so pure,

his legs stood still, though his herd was on the move.

Enkidu was diminished, his running was not as before,
but he had reason, he [was] wide of understanding.

(SBV I: 196–202)

The physical and emotional distancing of Enkidu from his herd is engineered by Gilgamesh, who predicts the events which will unfold following Enkidu's meeting with Shamhat, saying:

(Enkidu's) herd will be estranged from him, though he grew up in its presence.

The estrangement of Enkidu from his herd is poignant, especially when placed in context with the *Epic*'s continued focus on his lack of family. Being part of the herd's community, and sharing their water, brought happiness to his heart—a common result of close, positive social connections in Mesopotamian literature. While the narrative makes clear the benefits of the acculturation process (Enkidu's "wide understanding"), the process is undoubtedly bittersweet, and involves significant loss (Westenholz and Westenholz, 2000: 444).

Learning, loss, and the call of the wild

To become Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu must be drawn from his wilderness home. As noted by Kuntzmann, the intimacy between the heroes is preceded in the text by their careful separation—Gilgamesh begins the text in the company of humans and deities, and his physicality is derived from the human and the superhuman; Enkidu begins the *Epic* in the company of animals, created from clay (1983: 56).

Enkidu's process of civilisation is successful, in that it leads him to Gilgamesh, the man who he was created to counsel and accompany. Yet, despite the narrative's appreciation of the products of civilisation, the acculturation of Enkidu is not presented as entirely beneficial to him, or without sacrifice. Enkidu moves from a state of happy innocence to acquiring reason, and his acculturation seems at times to be unwilling, and emotionally confusing.

Even after his initial meeting with Shamhat, which begins the process of civilisation, Enkidu's first wish is to return to his herd. When he discovers he can no longer keep up with them, he returns to his new lover. Shamhat presents to Enkidu the religious setting of life in Uruk, and the companionship of Gilgamesh, as alternatives to the ability to "roam the wild with the animals." Enkidu accepts these alternatives, due to his loneliness; the text clarifies the young man's motivations: "(Enkidu's) heart (now) wise was seeking a friend" (SBV I: 214).

The theme of the wandering hero longing to return home is familiar particularly due to the well-known example of Homer's Odysseus, who finally returns home to Ithaca after ten long years of adventuring. Despite Enkidu's love for Gilgamesh, his loneliness and pining for his former life in the wild are a continued part of his

characterisation in the narrative, until his death.

On his deathbed, Enkidu expresses his regrets about his process of civilisation, and lays heavy curses on the trapper and Shamhat—the pair he perceives as responsible for his unhappy situation. There is irony to this dramatic scene, as the audience is aware that it is Enkidu's beloved Gilgamesh who has engineered his acculturation, and whose belligerent behaviour at the start of the narrative underlies Enkidu's very existence. Once again in this scene, Enkidu is presented with the alternatives to his wild life. The solar deity Shamash questions Enkidu's choice to curse Shamhat (seemingly the trapper is fair game for Enkidu's curses). In a striking piece of dialogue, Shamash speaks directly to Enkidu from the sky, asking:

Why, O Enkidu, do you keep cursing the harlot Šamhat,
who gave you bread to eat, fit for a god,
gave you beer to drink, fit for a king,
clothed you in a great garment,
and let you have for a comrade the fine Gilgameš?

(SBV VII: 134–138)

In Shamash's speech, the products of civilisation, such as clothing and eating bread, are conceptually related to drawing Enkidu away from his animal state, and towards divinity and royalty. The love of Gilgamesh, and the hero's capacity to provide Enkidu with appropriate mourning rituals following his death, are the focus of the second half of Shamash's speech:

Now Gilgameš, your friend and brother,
[will] lay you out on a great bed.
[On] a bed of honour he will lay you out,
[he will] set you on a restful seat, the seat to (his) left,
[the princes] of earth will kiss your feet ...
[And] he, after you are gone he will have himself bear the
matted hair of mourning,
[he will don] the skin of a lion and go roaming in the [wild.]

(SBV VII: 139–143, 146–147)

Gilgamesh's emotional closeness to Enkidu and the familial connection between them are provided by Shamash as reasons for Enkidu's "angry heart" to be placated. It is possible that the reference in the text to Gilgamesh as Enkidu's "brother" relates to Enkidu's adoption by Ninsun, but just as probable would be that it is a

metaphorical use of the word, to express the family-like closeness between the two heroes.

The words of Shamash, like those of Shamhat earlier in the narrative, have the immediate effect of changing Enkidu's outlook, and causing him to take action. Instead of cursing Shamhat, after Shamash's speech, he blesses her. Gadd has suggested that Enkidu is only "half-persuaded" by Shamash's advice, and sees humour and hyperbole in the extravagant blessings placed on Shamhat by Enkidu (Gadd, 1966). Gadd's observation allows for a further comparison with Gilgamesh, who retains a similar scepticism about death and post-mortem funerary traditions in the *Death of Gilgamesh* (considered in [Chapter 6](#)).

There are clear parallels between the content of Shamhat's speech, endorsing civilised life, and Shamash's verbal instructions for Enkidu to appreciate the benefits that his acculturation has brought him. The similarity in content between the two speeches adds coherence to the theme of animality and civilisation in the *Epic*.

Both speakers suggest the love of Gilgamesh as having the capacity to give meaning to Enkidu's life. Both Shamash and Shamhat also instruct Enkidu on the high value of the religious aspect of civilised life; Shamash tells him of the temples sacred to Ishtar and Anu in Uruk, and Shamash describes the religious activity of mourning that will follow Enkidu's death. The mourning described by Shamash is a communal religious activity, one involving all the people at Uruk, encompassing members of the community at all levels of the social scale. Receiving similar advice from two sources at key places in Enkidu's journey (just prior to meeting Gilgamesh, and then just prior to his death), gives extra weight to the words of Shamhat and Shamash.

The focus on love and communal religious activity in the speeches of Shamhat and Shamash provide a kind of remedy for the loneliness and unhappiness caused by Enkidu's separation from the wild. Enkidu's process of civilisation has given him "wide understanding," but the self-awareness that is a part of this understanding brings with it feelings of isolation and a need for meaning in life.

The value of knowledge in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

In Tablet XII, as well as in the Sumerian story of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, knowledge is presented as an essential tool for

survival. Gilgamesh gives Enkidu clear instructions on how to enter the Netherworld and successfully return:

If [you are going to descend] to the Netherworld,
[you should pay heed to] my instructions!
[You must not dress in] a clean garment,
they will identify you as a stranger!

(SBV XII: 11–14)

The advice continues for several lines, and seems to be largely directed at the aim of avoiding unwanted attention from the residents of the Netherworld. Enkidu rather unwisely disregards Gilgamesh's advice entirely, a decision expressed bluntly in the narrative:

[Enkidu,] descending [to the Netherworld,]
paid no heed [to the instructions of Gilgameš].

(SBV XII: 31–32)

Enkidu's neglect of Gilgamesh's advice provides an opportunity to demonstrate the accuracy of Gilgamesh's instructions. Events unfold just as Gilgamesh had warned, and Enkidu is seized by the Netherworld, and unable to escape. Gilgamesh in this narrative does not have a complete knowledge of the Netherworld; he is later seen to ask Enkidu how various individuals fared there.

Despite the limits of Gilgamesh's understanding of the topic, knowledge and the appropriate behaviour resulting from wisdom are shown to have a vital significance. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), the knowledge Gilgamesh gains from his visit to Utanapishtim in Tablet XI is critical for preserving cosmic order, and for the continuation of life for humans and animals. From these two examples, it is clear that knowledge and wisdom in *Gilgamesh* are presented with an extremely high value. The search for the acquisition of knowledge shapes Gilgamesh's journeys and character.

Accessing knowledge

The attainment of wisdom is a central concern of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and there is great diversity to the types and sources of knowledge in the *Epic*. As noted by Annus, in terms of accessibility, knowledge is at times presented as hidden, rather than entirely inaccessible (2016: 18).

There is a hierarchical element to the accessibility of knowledge in *Gilgamesh*. Hidden knowledge can be retrieved by certain individuals, but access is filtered in several ways. In the example of the post-diluvian rites, access is generally held to be impossible, through a combination of its remote location and the dangerous obstacles presented to those who might seek it. In this way, Gilgamesh is a little like a proto-Indiana Jones, and indeed, the Indiana Jones series prominently engages with the idea of acquired knowledge bestowing a survival advantage (Pryke, 2016b).

It is Gilgamesh's exceptionality which grants him the capacity to collect wisdom from Utanapishtim. His semi-divine status assists in passing the Scorpion People and into the Path of the Sun, and his role as king of Uruk helps to create a bond with the Flood survivor. Gilgamesh is in this way uniquely suited to uncovering the wisdom which he seeks.

The connection between Gilgamesh's wisdom and his divine favour is stated explicitly in Tablet I. Shamhat describes the many special qualities of the young king to Enkidu, but warns him that Gilgamesh is divinely protected:

As for Gilgameš, Šamaš loves him.

Anu, Enlil and Ea broadened his wisdom.

(SBV I: 241–242)

Shamhat's warning about Gilgamesh's divinely gifted wisdom precedes her observation that Gilgamesh will have been forewarned of Enkidu's coming in a dream. The dreams of Gilgamesh are then described. Interestingly, it is the wisdom of Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun that is useful for interpreting the divine message, and her wisdom is then lauded by the narrator for revealing the meaning of the dream.

Diversification of knowledge in Gilgamesh

The hierarchical aspect of knowledge and its accessibility in *Gilgamesh* is related to the diversity of wisdom in the literature. The voice of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* has a polyphonous quality, with multiple stances on wisdom presented within a single telling of the story, as well as between different versions.

Van der Toorn has argued that the different presentations of wisdom in the Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian Versions of

Gilgamesh result from a broader shift in the perception of wisdom between the first and second millennium BCE (2007). Wisdom was a human virtue in earlier periods, expressed through good counsel, just verdicts and wise sayings, before transitioning to a more esoteric concept, and a virtue possessed only by deities (Van der Toorn, 2007: 21).

Van der Toorn's analysis is useful for explaining the difference in emphasis on the nature of wisdom across the two versions, although it is worth noting that the both types of "wisdom" are displayed in both texts. An example of a difference in emphasis is shown in the change exhibited in Siduri's role in advising the young king.

Siduri

Siduri is the divine innkeeper who lives by the seashore in the land beyond the Path of the Sun. Gilgamesh meets Siduri in Tablet X, after she is briefly introduced to the audience in Tablet IX.

Siduri is one of several wise women characters in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, with the *Epic* presenting a diverse view of women and wisdom. The types of wisdom held by different characters, and between different female characters, are distinct, yet there are also points of similarity which may reflect overarching thematic concerns of the *Epic*.

As the keeper of a tavern, Siduri is one of several female characters connected to the products of agriculture. Siduri and Shamhat, through the theme of food and eating, voice and uphold the social norms of Mesopotamian society (the two characters are contrasted in Ackerman, 2002). Both women are presented as dispensers of wisdom (Harris, 2000: 124).

Even Utanapishtim's wife, who in the rest of the narrative silently shadows the activities of her husband, is given an activity tied to food production. Utanapishtim's wife expresses concern for Gilgamesh's welfare, and her husband instructs her to bake bread to show the hero that time has been passing (XI: 220–224).

In Tablet VI, Ishtar is positively linked to abundant food supplies—Enkidu blesses Shamhat with prosperity, and invokes the goddess Ishtar to provide Shamhat with a man; one who has storage bins "heaped high" (SBV VII: 159–160). This positive connection between Ishtar and food can be contrasted against the more negative imagery relating to the goddess and baked goods from Tablet VI, in

Gilgamesh's speech rejecting her proposal of marriage (Pryke, 2017a).

Siduri promotes the simple pleasures of domestic life in the Old Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*. The more subtle elements of Siduri's speech in the Old Babylonian Version are employed not only to encourage the hero to embrace life, but to accept mortality and relinquish his search for immortality (Abusch, 1993). Her role in the Standard Version (although the passage is quite fragmented) seems aimed at more pragmatic goals, such as finding a way through physical obstacles to reach Utanapishtim. Siduri's identity as a wisdom deity (George, 2003: 149) adds special weight to her expertise, which as we have seen is not limited to purely esoteric matters.

In the Old Babylonian Version, Siduri presents Gilgamesh and the audience with an unambiguous truth concerning the human condition:

'O Gilgameš, where are you wandering?
You cannot find the life that you seek:
when the gods created mankind,
for mankind they established death,
life they kept for themselves.'

(*Gilgamesh* OB VA + BM iii: 1–5)

Similar advice is bestowed upon Gilgamesh by Utanapishtim in Tablet X of the Standard Babylonian Version:

The Anunnaki, the great gods, were in assembly,
Mammitum, who creates destiny, made a decree with them:
death and life they did establish,
the day of death they did not reveal.

(SBV X: 319–322)

Siduri's wisdom is presented through her advice in the Old Babylonian Version, and her knowledge surrounding the crossing of the Waters of Death in the Standard Babylonian Version (the relation between Siduri's speeches and the surrounding epic has been explored by Abusch, 2015).

Siduri's wisdom is further evident in her ability to take counsel with herself, and to reflect on matters (Denning-Bolle, 1987). Siduri reflects on the nature of her strange visitor when Gilgamesh appears at the gate of her remote tavern:

Talking to herself she spoke a word,
taking counsel in her own mind:

‘For sure this man is a slayer of wild bulls;
whence did he make straight for my gate?’

(SBV X: 11–14)

As noted by Denning-Bolle in her analysis of Near Eastern wisdom and dialogue, the reflexive form of the Akkadian verb *malāku* (meaning “to advise,” CAD 10: 154–157) shows Siduri’s inner reflection (1987: 27).

Siduri is not shown to be omniscient; her knowledge shows specialisation. While she does not know if it is possible to cross the Waters of Death, she is able to direct Gilgamesh to the Boatman, who possesses the required knowledge and skills for this task.

Concealed wisdom

The content of the secrets concealed by deities in the two passages shows some differentiation, but it is clear that in the hierarchy of access to wisdom, the deities are in a superior position. The shift towards hidden knowledge in the place of overt wisdom has been discussed by Van der Toorn (2007), but it is worth noting further that even for characters towards the top of the hierarchical relations involving deities and humans, not all knowledge is accessible. The exception to this pattern in the accessing of wisdom is Utanapishtim, further emphasising his exceptionality. Utanapishtim accesses secret wisdom reserved only for deities in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—not once, but twice.

Gilgamesh shows multiple perspectives on wisdom and varying types of knowledge presented from different characters. Individual figures in the narrative show some specialisation in areas of expertise and wisdom. In the Standard Babylonian Version, religious expertise is primarily demonstrated by Ninsun, Utanapishtim, and ultimately, Gilgamesh himself. More pragmatic knowledge is possessed by the elders of Uruk, who caution Gilgamesh against his journey to the Cedar Forest, and Siduri, who recommends Gilgamesh abandon his quest.

The filtering of access to knowledge is achieved through distance, status, divine favour, and his heroic qualities. Gilgamesh’s superphysical capacity to undertake long journeys through dangerous territories gives him an advantage in the gaining of wisdom. He is further advantaged through his quasi-divine and kingly status, as can be seen in the positive treatment he receives from the Scorpion People

The scorpion-man called to his female:

‘He who has come to us, flesh of the gods is in his body.’

The scorpion-man’s female answered him:

‘Two-thirds of him are god but a third of him is human.’

(SBV IX: 48–51)

Gilgamesh capitalises on the Scorpion People’s recognition of his unusual heritage by emphasising his close relationship with Utanapishtim, who he refers to as “*abi-ia*”: “my forefather” (SBV IX: 75). The Scorpion People give Gilgamesh access to the path of the sun, usually travelled only by the solar deity Shamash, showing the currency of his elite status and connections.

Gaining wisdom

The characterisation of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* as highly valuable, yet not always freely available, invites consideration of the methods of transmission of knowledge. The communication of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* is a complex issue, combining several elements that are central to the *Epic*.

Wisdom is transmitted in *Gilgamesh* primarily through dialogue. Oral communication, as opposed to written instructions, forms the main mode of sharing knowledge. This communication is often packaged in the form of advice or counsel, but can also be presented through an instructive story, a comparison, or a description.

The emphasis on revealing information through speech means the acquisition of knowledge in *Gilgamesh* relies heavily on the communication and social bonds between characters. This emphasis subtly illuminates the importance of close relationships, both human and divine, in the text.

The predominance of oral traditions in the dispersal of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* is curious considering the literary nature of the text. In his study of love and knowledge in *Gilgamesh*, Foster showed that the transcendent quality of knowledge, reaching beyond the physical form of the self, is reflected in the poem inscribed on the clay tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1987: 42).

Foster’s view gives further significance to the literary legacy of *Gilgamesh*—it is in the continued significance of the young king’s story, rather than more directly through conquest, that Gilgamesh

achieves the lasting glory he persistently pursued. The dominantly oral nature of the transmission of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* may potentially be related to the oral traditions that are thought to have historically related to the literature.

The transmission of knowledge to Gilgamesh in the text has the added function of imparting information to the audience. Gilgamesh's exclusive access to wisdom is shared by the audience, who learn "secret" information through the dialogue between the characters. While the narrator at times provides exposition (such as in the initial description of Gilgamesh's tyranny in Tablet I), less common knowledge is presented to the hero and the audience through the speeches of the characters.

There are important exceptions to the transmission of wisdom through speech in *Gilgamesh*. Wisdom can also be developed, without the need for transmission, through lived experience or observation. A further exception is the transmission of wisdom through dreams. In dreams, divine wisdom is communicated through symbolism, imagery, and speech. Gilgamesh is the recipient of symbolic and mantic dreams at several points in his journey. These dreams are interpreted (with varying success) by those close to him. Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, plays an important role both in correctly interpreting his dreams, and performing acts of divination to secure further divine support for her son.

Dreams

Dreams form a crucial nexus of communication between the divine and human worlds in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and provide a conduit for the transmission of information. Following the classic typology of Oppenheim, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* shows a mixture of dream varieties, including "messenger" dreams (where a divinity appears with a message), "symbolic" dreams (involving the need for the analysis of symbolic imagery), and "mantic" dreams, prophesying future events (1956).

The accurate interpretation of dreams was an important skill, and an ability not available to all. This reveals the exclusivity of wisdom revealed in dreams, with the gaining of knowledge reliant firstly on the revelation of a dream, and then on its successful interpretation. Both parts of the dream's reception must be successfully managed to

ensure the receipt of the message, putting an emphasis on divine connections in the reception of prophetic dreams, and on skilful expertise in the dream's interpretation.

The variability of oneiric reading is shown in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* through the contrasting characters of Enkidu and Ninsun, whose relationships to the young king are discussed in [Chapter 4](#). While Ninsun interprets Gilgamesh's dreams skilfully, Enkidu seems to misinterpret Gilgamesh's nightmares on the journey to the Cedar Forest. Later in the text, Enkidu is able to correctly interpret his own dreams as forewarning future sinister events.

Gilgamesh's legendary role as the king of Uruk necessitates his familiarity with religious rituals, and his role in omen texts requires the ability to interpret visions. Dream interpretation in *Gilgamesh* emphasises the interconnectivity of wisdom, religious observance, and divine favour.

The inability of Gilgamesh to interpret his own dreams in the narrative of the *Epic* creates a contrast with his identification as a king and judge of the underworld, and interpreter of dreams, in omen and ritual texts. Gilgamesh has meaningful dreams requiring interpretation in the apocryphal Book of Enoch (Frölich, 2014: 22–23). The close connection of Enoch with Flood traditions raises further comparisons with the *Epic's* Flood survivor, Utanapishtim, who is presented with the ability to interpret signs (Frölich, 2012).

Dreams and wisdom were closely linked in many literary works of the Ancient Near East, including the Hebrew Bible, although much productive scholarship has focused on the uniqueness of mantic episodes across different cultural contexts. As a means of communication between mortals and the divine, dreams are related to divination in Mesopotamian religion. If a dream was successfully interpreted as holding undesirable portents, then there was the opportunity for the projected course of fate to be altered or assuaged, through the correct application of ritual.

Omens derived from dreams had “collective” information with universal applications, meaning they could apply to anyone who encountered certain phenomena while dreaming (Rocheberg, 2004: 83). Knowledge and wisdom was required for the interpretation of mantic visions, signs and symbols, and in historical settings this was often the work of religious specialists. Like the composers and editors of ancient literature, diviners possessed specialist skills involving drawing meaning from complex evidence (Glassner, 2012), with their work involving the interpretation of divine communications.

Wisdom and knowledge were closely connected the divine world in Mesopotamia, as well as the broader Ancient Near East. Wisdom, dreams, and divination all involved connecting with religious ideas and practices. If “wisdom” in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the means for delineating the human and divine worlds, then the gaining of knowledge could be viewed as a spiritual endeavour. Dreams and divination are linked to the divide between humanity and divinity; both activities involve reaching beyond the mortal world and exploring the divine boundaries.

Gilgamesh: wisdom and mediation

With multiple varieties of wisdom presented in traditions surrounding Gilgamesh, it is worthwhile recalling that the wisdom that Gilgamesh ultimately gains comes from Utanapishtim. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), Utanapishtim delivers Gilgamesh secret wisdom which is particularly relevant to his role as a king. The religious responsibilities of kingship necessitate Gilgamesh’s understanding of human and divine relationships, and how to facilitate and tend to these relationships through cultic practices.

The significance of the king as a mediator between the divine and human worlds was explored in [Chapter 1](#). Relations between humanity and divinity reach a particularly low point in *Gilgamesh* during the legendary Flood, recounted in Tablet XI. Utanapishtim’s account of this event emphasises the importance of the kingly role in tending to the human connection with divinity, and the consequences when the connection falters.

Communication is emphasised throughout the Flood narrative, illustrating the vital currency of receiving and correctly interpreting divine wisdom. Prior to the meeting with Utanapishtim in Tablet X, Gilgamesh meets Ishtar, and the encounter between them gives a kind of cautionary example of failed divine mediation.

Ishtar’s importance to historical kingship has already been discussed, with the goddess’s unique relationship to the king providing him with protection, support, and power. Through placing the young king in conflict with Ishtar, the narrative allows the audience to evaluate Gilgamesh’s success as Uruk’s ruler:

Ishtar’s presence in the *Gilgamesh Epic* provides an important reference point for measuring the success with which Gilgamesh inhabits the role of king. The loving relationship between Ishtar

and the Mesopotamian king, with its related blessings and benefits, is an important sub-text for the Epic's exploration of the themes of kingship, divinity and mortality. Ishtar traditionally offers the king love and life: while Gilgamesh wants both things, his journey does not end in the embrace of the goddess.

(Pryke, 2017a: 159)

There is a further aspect of Gilgamesh's disharmony with Ishtar which, in the historical context of Mesopotamian kingship, relates to wisdom. Just as the Mesopotamian king provided mediation between the human and divine world, Ishtar historically inhabited the role of mediatrix between the king and the pantheon (Nissinen, 2009: 386–387; Pryke, 2017a; [Chapter 5](#)). The significance of this mediation to the topic of wisdom has been clearly expressed by Nissinen, while exploring the ideology of female deities with the transmission of knowledge:

As a member of the ancient Near Eastern divine council, the goddess – more often than not Ištar or one of her manifestations – is the “diviner of the gods,” a mediatrix through whom the decisions of the divine council are communicated to the people. A similar pattern functions in the Mesopotamian sacred marriage, where the goddess assumes the role of an intercessor for the king and the people and the intermediary between gods and humans. Likewise in Assyrian prophecy, Ištar speaks for the king in the presence of puḥur ilāni. In both cases, the goddess is the transmitter of divine love and knowledge, establishing an ideal relationship between the heavenly and earthly domains.

(Nissinen, 2009: 386–387)

Seen from this perspective, Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar is quite literally a rejection of closer divine relations, and the potential for wisdom and good leadership that would accompany this bond. For a contemporaneous audience, the devastating consequences following Gilgamesh's refusal would have reinforced the value of positive communication and relations between the king and deities. Death and destruction result from Gilgamesh's refusal. Instead of loving words bringing the pair closer together, Gilgamesh's harsh rebuke creates alienation and silence from Ishtar. Instead of appealing to other deities to protect the king, in Tablet VI Ishtar asks Anu's help to destroy him. In the place of a divine union bringing abundance to the land, the

presence of the Bull of Heaven on earth creates a terrible drought and famine.

While much useful scholarship has been devoted to exploring why Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar, the importance of a wise king mediating with the divine presents his refusal in simple terms. Gilgamesh, in rejecting the beautiful love deity, provides an compelling example of what not to do for a king wishing to display wisdom and leadership.

Aetiologies and origins

Throughout this book, a number of aetiological episodes involving Gilgamesh have been noted. The prominence of aetiological stories in *Gilgamesh* is important for the consideration of the presentation of wisdom in the text.

By nature, aetiologies provide an inner knowledge of their subjects. In showing how things came to be in their current form, a greater understanding of the subject, its context, and cultural value are offered. While rarely explicitly commented upon in the ancient literature, aetiologies frequently appear in epic compositions, and are often closely connected to the significance of the narrative.

The probable aetiological passages of Gilgamesh are sufficiently numerous to evade a detailed consideration here, and instead a few examples will be given. Perhaps the best known aetiological sequence from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the scene from Tablet XI, where a snake steals the youth-renewing herb from the young king. This sequence provides a mythical explanation for the biological reality of snakes shedding their skins (Dalley, 2000).

The adoption of Enkidu by Ninsun has been recognised as providing an aetiology into the origins of the practice of temple adoption (George, 2003: 462). Numerous geographical aetiologies have been explored by scholars, including the origins of the Levantine Rift Valley (George, 1990). The emphasis on origins, seen in aetiological sequences, extends to the exploration in *Gilgamesh* of aspects of creation.

How does the presence of aetiologies in *Gilgamesh* relate to the narrative's focus on wisdom? It is generally accepted that Gilgamesh is fascinated with death, and at several points he endeavours to find out more about the subject. Indeed, the preoccupation with death in the protagonist reflects a larger concern with mortality in the *Epic* itself. Yet, it is less commonly observed that *Gilgamesh* is also concerned

with creation: it is not only the end of things that is considered by the *Epic*'s composers, but also their beginnings. The creation of Enkidu in Tablet I allows for consideration in the narrative of his origins and their influence, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself could be viewed as an "origin story," recounting how the legendary king became wise. It is in exploring the topic of creation, and how things came to be, that the aetiologies of the *Epic* make an important contribution to the theme of wisdom.

Wisdom and meaning in Gilgamesh

In the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero's experiences and his encounters with others develop his capacity for wisdom, a personal quality which is lauded in the *Epic*'s first tablet. It is difficult to be entirely certain of the kind of wisdom that Gilgamesh has gained. He has experienced life and death and developed a better understanding of mortality, but his adventures have also presented him with a greater awareness of the meaning of life, love and his role as a king.

Gilgamesh's eventual return to Uruk, in Tablet XI, is often noted for its ability to inform on the meaning of the *Epic* overall. Although it is in Tablet XII with the journey of Enkidu to the netherworld that the Standard Babylonian Version ends, the final lines of Tablet XI bring to conclusion the long narrative arc of Gilgamesh's adventures in the first eleven tablets.

In these final lines of Tablet XI, from 319–328, Gilgamesh returns home with Ur-Shanabi. Although he leaves for Uruk in a state of emotional despair following the loss of the heartbeat plant, his return to his home leads the young king to proudly describe the city's architecture to his new companion, and the audience:

Go up, Ur-šanabi, on to the wall of Uruk and walk around,
survey the foundation platform, inspect the brickwork!

(See) if its brickwork is not kiln-fired brick,
and if the Seven Sages did not lay its foundations!

One šār is city, one šār date-grove, one šār is clay-pit, half a šār
the temple of Ištar:

Three šār and a half (is) Uruk, (its) measurement.

(SBV XI: 323–328)

The placement of these lines at the end of the main arc of the *Epic*,

and the plot device of a return to Uruk, the hero's original geographical setting and his royal home, are structurally indicative of a conclusion, with the potential for a narrative outcome which might bring closure to the arc of the epic's plot, and a sense of meaning from its contents (Zgoll, 2010: 443–470). Yet, Gilgamesh's sudden appreciation for the construction and design of his city comes as something of a surprise when contrasted with his rather self-involved exploits from the previous ten tablets.

The juxtaposition of Gilgamesh's self-seeking adventures with his reflective admiration for his city upon returning home suggest a subtly realised conclusion to the esoteric journeys of the text. Indeed, as Zgoll notes, the building of walls is not generally a solitary pursuit, but requires collective effort and cooperation (2010: 465).

The king's careful measuring out of the city spaces in this speech hints at his increased awareness of the balance of the city, and the need for careful management of that balance by the king. The city provided the ancient Mesopotamians with a basis to develop civilisation, and connected the human and divine realms: cities were built by deities and inhabited by mortals (George, 2003: 527). Gilgamesh's measurements reflect his understanding of the mixed nature of his city. The measurements commemorate the date-grove alongside the Temple of Ishtar, the city itself and the "clay pit."

It seems probable that these final measurements are a poetic representation of the principle elements of Uruk. The Temple of Ishtar can be viewed as religious imagery, representing the position of the divine in the city. Date imagery is commonly associated with royalty (and divinity) in Mesopotamian literature, and could symbolise the presence of the king and the royal family. The prominent role of the medium of clay in the *Epic* would suggest that the reference to the "clay pit" has a symbolic meaning. Throughout the *Epic*, clay is linked to humanity: Enkidu is created by Aruru from clay, and the majority of humanity, who did not survive the Flood, are said to have turned to clay. Clay, in Gilgamesh's measurements, may symbolise the human element of the city, which is self-representative as the first "*sar*" of measurement.

Of course, with the *Epic* itself written in cuneiform on tablets of clay, the mention of the "clay pit" may also represent the written traditions and civilised culture of the city—and possibly a self-referential nod from the composers. The potential of great creative endeavours such as the building of a wall can be compared to the legacy of a written masterpiece (Sallaberger, 2004; Zgoll, 2010).

Gilgamesh's character undergoes a transformation in the *Epic* that is closely related to his identity as king of Uruk. At the beginning of the narrative he oppresses his subjects in the pursuit of his own interests. He then goes on a dangerous and distant journey away from Uruk in pursuit of glory and fame. Following a period of mourning for Enkidu, the hero goes to seek a remedy to cure all ills and deliver eternal life for himself, and, when that fails, to return to his youth.

Yet, it is a different type of glory that Gilgamesh finally appreciates when returning to Uruk. It is the communal grandeur of the city that he learns to appreciate—a fitting object of love and admiration for the young king. From focusing on his own achievements and the making of his own “name,” Gilgamesh has a sudden change of heart where it is the timeless glory of his home that captures his attention, and it is the city's glory, rather than his own, which he praises. When viewed from the perspective of the role of historical kingship in ancient Mesopotamia, this plot development presents the concluding view that Gilgamesh has grown into his royal responsibilities, and at the same time, become wise.

Gilgamesh's deeper appreciation of his home city is shaped by his experiences of foreign leaders and places throughout his journeys. The characters of Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, Siduri, and Utanapishtim all contain qualities in their literary portraits which can be associated closely with their geographical homes and status. This quality of mixing home and origins with identity is further reflected at an earlier stage in the narrative where the differing backgrounds and habitats of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are part of their distinctive identities.

Considered in this light, the overall narrative of the text could be considered to present a character's “home” as a constituent part of their identity. With this in mind, Gilgamesh's actions throughout the narrative can be seen as counter to the theme of the shaping nature of “home.” Gilgamesh is initially an awkward fit for the role ascribed to him by his home, but by the end of his journey to visit Utanapishtim, he appears to wear the crown with greater acceptance.

It has been noted that, while Gilgamesh “commemorates” Uruk in his speech to Ur-Shanabi, he is also immortalising himself through his bonds with the city and its traditions (Smith, 2014: 58). Foster has demonstrated the significance of the narrative itself in this process of “commemoration”—Gilgamesh is further “immortalised” in the text of the *Epic* (1987). This is perhaps a fitting tribute for the scribes who composed the ancient literature, and created a legacy that has stood the test of time (with a few exceptions discussed in the final chapter of

this book). Gilgamesh's continued fame in the present day proves the foresight—and indeed, wisdom—of the *Epic's* composers.

Conclusion

Knowledge and wisdom play a central role in Gilgamesh's story. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* gives a deep and diverse exploration of the nature of wisdom, with the theme of wisdom powerfully shaping the protagonist's narrative arc. Gilgamesh shows a range of stances in his developing understanding of wisdom, and his curiosity and search for knowledge takes him to the very edges of the earth.

The many different types of wisdom in Gilgamesh reflect the literary sophistication of the text: through the avoidance of establishing a single mode of wisdom, the composers of the text demonstrate the nuanced approach to wisdom seen in Ancient Near Eastern literature more broadly. Gilgamesh does become wise in the course of his adventures, and the nature of his knowledge is particularly relevant to his role as Uruk's king.

Enkidu provides an important contrast to Gilgamesh on the theme of wisdom: he transforms from a wild man, with knowledge of the forest and its creatures, to a civilised person who possesses language and self-awareness. The acquisition of knowledge for both heroes is costly, and for Enkidu particularly, heartbreaking.

Wisdom in *Gilgamesh* is presented as vital for the survival of the city of Uruk, the continuation of civilisation, and the bonds between the human and divine worlds. Even with all of this at stake, wisdom is not always presented in a clear or positive light in the *Epic*. This gives the theme of wisdom in *Gilgamesh* a meditative quality, which invites the audience to consider the meaning of the many questions raised through the narrative.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* emphasises the subjective nature of wisdom, and the continued tension between the struggle to attain knowledge and the limited spectrum of human understanding. Through the theme of wisdom, the young hero's adventures are given depth and ambiguity, a richness that is reflected in the character of Gilgamesh himself.



“Forget death and [seek] life!” (*Gilgamesh*, SBV IV: 245). With these words, Gilgamesh encapsulates the considerations of mortality and humanity that lie at the heart of the world’s most ancient epic. Life and death are competing yet complementary concerns for the heroic young king. While Gilgamesh’s fear of death becomes an obsession (Jacobsen, 2001: 192), it also leads him on a quest to better understand and appreciate the nature of life. Exploring the theme of death in this chapter connects several of the themes considered in previous chapters, such as kingship, love, humanity, and wisdom. The finitude of death cuts through the ambiguities of Gilgamesh’s narrative, and provides his story with lasting resonance through his identification as a powerful yet mortal figure.

Death has a central role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Gilgamesh’s association with death is one of the most enduring aspects of his character. As noted in the Introduction, this volume explores Gilgamesh’s identity, considering how his narrative shapes the presentation of his image in the *Epic* and other ancient sources. In the broader context of Mesopotamian religious traditions, Gilgamesh was connected to the chthonic realm, ruling as a judge and deity over the shades of the Netherworld (George, 2003: 124). This association is referenced in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic* (George, 2013: 133), and is also seen in incantations and medical prescriptions, prayers, and exorcism rituals.

It is significant that Gilgamesh’s eventual role as a ruler of shades in the underworld is part of his story, as his efforts to overcome death in the *Epic*, or his own fear of death, lends a kind of sympathy to his identification with mortuary traditions. While comparing *Gilgamesh* with biblical literature, Shields noted the potential for the *Epic*’s consumption in the ancient world to relate to the audience’s shared mortality:

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* establishes a history for its main character

who was otherwise known as a ruler and judge in the Netherworld. This history allows the audience to find in him a figure who could empathise with their own predicament as they face their own entry into the Netherworld, a prospect which would have been as daunting for them as it had been for Gilgameš.

(Shields, 2007: 144)

As Shields observes, Gilgamesh's identification with death, known from broader religious traditions, is entwined with his characterisation in the *Epic*. In the narrative of Gilgamesh, the hero is unaware of his eventual posthumous role, but his mother shows prescience of it (George, 1999a: li), and the audience would have shared in this foreknowledge. The contrast between the hero, innocent of his own fate, and the knowing audience creates a sense of irony that colours the events of the narrative with additional meaning.

Gilgamesh's character is shaped by his mortality. In this chapter, Gilgamesh's relationship with death is considered, as well as the theme of death and the afterlife in several texts focused on the hero. Although Gilgamesh is perhaps most famous for his quest to supersede his own mortality, he expresses a variety of attitudes to death and the afterlife in his literary portraits. Indeed, even within the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero's relationship with his own mortality undergoes significant changes that illuminate the continuing unfolding of his character in response to the experiences of the narrative.

This book considers how Gilgamesh's narrative and identity are related, and it is perhaps in the theme of death where this connection is most apparent. As Helle notes in his study of emotions in *Gilgamesh*, the death of the hero's companion in Tablet VII "brings about a fundamental change, not only in the story, but in its main character as well" (Helle, 2016: 50).

Death and the afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia were areas of important religious significance, and the focus of a range of religious observances. The diverse attitudes to death and the afterlife, exhibited by Gilgamesh, are reflected in the variety of conceptions of death in ancient Mesopotamian literature. Although the modern day understanding of Mesopotamian views on death and the afterlife is a developing area of scholarly exploration, it can be reliably asserted that the written evidence on the topic gives a complex and multifaceted perspective of the ancient Mesopotamians' conception of death.

Religious activities such as divination are connected with death in the narrative; for example, Enkidu is sent prophetic dreams foreshadowing his death. Death is closely related to sleep and dreaming in traditions involving Gilgamesh. Sleep and death are both presented as liminal activities, which may bring the individual in closer contact with the divine; however, the realms of dreams and the afterlife can also be presented as frightening and isolating. Close connections to community and the divine, as well as the appropriate use of religious ritual, may provide a means to countering some of the negative aspects of death in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh, in the end, accepts his own mortality, yet his position in the afterlife is not like that of ordinary mortals. At the same time, the role of prophecy, divination, and curse in stories relating to Gilgamesh raise questions over the malleability of fate and the future in the mythical world of the young hero.

Death in Mesopotamia

Death, as noted by Katz, is a biological reality, but death as opposed to life “is a culturally determined dualism, disparate from biological condition” (Katz, 2014: 716). While ancient narratives provide some sense of custom, such as the importance of properly mourning the deceased, the mythical nature of these sources creates uncertainty about how much the information that they offer can illuminate the Mesopotamian conceptions of death more broadly. Views on the afterlife require interpretation, and the accuracy of modern assessments of the ancient evidence likely suffer from the vast differences in time and context between antiquity and the modern day.

Due to the aim of this volume to provide an accessible account of Gilgamesh, it is worthwhile making some general observations around the current perception of the subject of death in Mesopotamia. The brief survey of the topic here is certainly not exhaustive, and it is possible that in addressing the topic in a general way, the reader may be given a misleading impression of cultural homogeneity throughout ancient Mesopotamia. Conversely, it can be stated that diversity is central to Mesopotamian culture. Cultural uniformity was not a feature of ancient Mesopotamian civilisations, and this observation is particularly relevant to topics that are especially deeply interwoven with religious practices, as these practices involved official and

popular streams (Katz, 2005: 55). A brief overview of the topic of death in Mesopotamia is given here to provide context for consideration of the theme as it relates to Gilgamesh.

There are a wide variety of sources for Mesopotamian views on death and the afterlife, including ritual texts, lamentations, magic and medical texts, omens, hymns and prayers. This diverse quality of the evidence provides some balance to our modern perspective, yet also create conflicting accounts of how the “after life” experience was conceived.

The varied nature of the sources on the Mesopotamian afterlife reflects diversity in its conception in ancient times. The suggestion of afterlife scepticism in some texts (Katz, 2003: 235) implies a range of perspectives around death and the existence (or otherwise) that followed the perishing of the body. Indeed, several studies have shown both archaeological and literary records reflect diversity in the thoughts and responses surrounding death and burial in ancient Mesopotamia, from the third millennium BCE and continuing throughout later periods (Vogel, 2013). However, the predominant view on death in Mesopotamia was “entrenched” in a belief in an afterlife, and death was seen as a process of transformation in both time and space (Katz, 2014: 716).

Proper performance of burial and mourning rites was necessary for the deceased to participate in “life” after death. In her exploration of Near Eastern kingship, Anagnostou-Laoutides has noted that the king’s close ties with divinities gave him an “exclusive knowledge” of the afterlife, and funerary practices (2017). Considered from this perspective, the king’s position as the “vertex” between the human and divine worlds while living is reflected also in death. Gilgamesh’s connection with death is closely related to his identity as king, as well to the accompanying virtue of wisdom, which was required to fulfil the royal role (see [Chapter 5](#)).

The underworld and the terrestrial realm were not entirely separate spheres; some amount of penetrability was tolerated between the two territories. Behaviours in the upper world had significant consequences for those below, and ghosts and demons were thought capable of rising periodically and haunting or otherwise interfering with living mortals. For both the inhabitants of the upper and lower worlds, actions that “crossed over” could be beneficial or harmful.

Appropriate funerary practices were crucial to prepare for the journey to the underworld (Scurlock, 1995: 1883–1884). This journey involved crossing demon-infested territory, negotiating the Khubur

River, and then passing through the underworld's seven gates (Scurlock, 1995: 1886–1887). Good mourning practices in the upper world resulted in a happier afterlife for those below, and dead relatives and loved ones could be consulted by the living for supernatural advice. Death was perceived as a gradual weakening of the connections that bound the deceased person to the land of the living, rather than as an abrupt and complete end (Scurlock, 1995: 1892).

The Netherworld was ruled by the Queen of the Underworld, Ereshkigal (who features in Enkidu's dream of death), and her spouse Nergal. The story of the “courtship” of the ruling pair forms the basis of the myth *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. This Akkadian myth involved several versions, which Holm notes to be part of a subgenre of *katabasis*, or journeys down to the Netherworld in Mesopotamian literature (2007: 275). Conversely, later versions of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* could be considered as containing elements of *katabasis* and *anabasis* (journeys up to heaven), as Nergal retreats from his lover. Other deities with prominent positions in the Netherworld included Namtar, Nimgizida, Geshtinanna (sister of Tammuz), and Gilgamesh (Katz, 2014).

Gilgamesh and death: an enduring connection

Gilgamesh, it is safe to say, is less than enamoured of his own mortality and the prospect of death. It is perhaps surprising, then, to note that of all the aspects of Gilgamesh's identity considered in this volume, the young king's connection to death can be considered one of the most wide-ranging and enduring.

Gilgamesh was known for his chthonic role in the Netherworld from early periods, although the various textual sources expanding on the nature of this role show some variation. In the Sumerian composition *The Death of Ur-Nammu* (ETCSL 2.4.1.1), Gilgamesh is described as the King of the Netherworld. This composition details the premature demise of one of Sumer's early kings, Ur-Nammu.

The historical figure Ur-Nammu is known for his great building works, the early legal text, *The Code of Ur-Nammu* (ca. 2100 BCE) and also as the founding ruler of the Ur III dynasty. Although death was unavoidable for the human kings of Mesopotamia, and important in delineating them from immortal deities, an early death “before one's time” could be viewed as a sign of divine displeasure (Potts, 1997:

220). In the *Death of Ur-Nammu*, the king, Ur-Nammu, is presented making offerings to several chthonic deities, including Gilgamesh:

To Gilgameš, the king of the nether world, in his palace, the shepherd Ur-Namma offered a spear, a leather bag for a saddle-hook, a heavenly lion-headed imitum mace, a shield resting on the ground, a heroic weapon, and a battle-axe, an implement beloved of Ereškigala

(*The Death of Ur-Namma/Ur-Namma A*, ETCSL c.2.4.1.1)

Later in the same composition, it is revealed that Ur-Nammu shares Gilgamesh's fate in the Netherworld. Interestingly, the role of Gilgamesh in the Netherworld in this composition appears to reflect his role while alive, in terms of dispensing justice:

So with Gilgameš, his beloved brother, (Ur-Nammu) will issue the judgments of the nether world and render the decisions of the nether world.

(*The Death of Ur-Namma/Ur-Namma A*, ETCSL c.2.4.1.1)

Although the text is very fragmented, it appears that Gilgamesh's role in dispensing chthonic justice may particularly involve the fates of warriors.

In his role as an underworld deity, Gilgamesh is frequently mentioned in religious texts, and received offerings and prayers. Frölich surmises that Gilgamesh as a ruler of the Netherworld had three main functions (2012). Firstly, he determined the verdict of those who were suffering, a role involving healing abilities. Secondly, Gilgamesh worked as an interpreter of omens, capable of prognosticating future events. Thirdly, the deity was considered to have authority over ghosts, and could protect the living from the dead and assist in the regulation and division of the Netherworld from the world above (Frölich, 2012).

Gilgamesh is often mentioned alongside the solar deity Shamash in prayers. In narrative literature, Gilgamesh's connection to Shamash is instrumental to his success, and this relationship is a feature of broader traditions featuring Gilgamesh. The connection is perhaps not surprising given Shamash's important role in delivering divine justice and making judgements, showing some overlap in the competencies of the two figures. In omen texts as well, it is thought there is some overlap between narrative traditions involving Gilgamesh, and his religious role (Lambert, 1960).

Gilgamesh also appears in the *Song of the Hoe* (ETCSL c.5.5.4) a composition which eludes easy categorisation, due to its composite features. The *Song of the Hoe* contains elements of a Creation-style account, possible puns on the Sumerian word *al* (“hoe”), along with similarities to debate poems (Black, 2004: 311).

Written at the end of the third millennium, the *Song of the Hoe* describes Gilgamesh as a mighty warrior, and the younger brother of Nergal, an underworld deity with a complex etymology (Steinkeller, 1987). Nergal, like Gilgamesh, is associated with war and death (Livingstone, 1999: 622).

In this composition, Gilgamesh is described as having special skills with oars, and this feature of his characterisation may reflect the hero’s journey across the Waters of Death (Black, 2004). It is also possible that the mention of oars refers to Gilgamesh’s role as a ferryman of the dead in the Underworld (George, 2003: 130–131). It seems likely that the two issues are related, with Gilgamesh’s ferrying activities in his epic adventures being conceptually related to his role in the Underworld in broader textual traditions.

Gilgamesh’s perception of death

In the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the young king’s views of death, mortality, and the afterlife are first clearly expressed in Tablet II, where he says:

As for man, [his days] are numbered,
All that ever he did is but [wind].

(SBV II: 234–235)

The context for this comment is in response to Enkidu’s stated reticence to travel to the Forest of Cedars. Enkidu has warned Gilgamesh of the terrible danger that would await them in the form of the forest guardian, Humbaba. Gilgamesh asks Enkidu why he is speaking “like a weakling,” and claims that his friend’s “feeble talk” is vexing to his heart.

Following this, Gilgamesh makes the comment that the time of mortal lives is limited, and the activities and achievements of humanity may slip quickly into obscurity. The danger of which Enkidu warns seems not to frighten Gilgamesh—instead, it forms part of the young king’s rationale for undertaking the perilous journey. Although the section is fragmented, Gilgamesh seems to then remind Enkidu of past dangers he has successfully faced in the past, while living in the

wilds.

With the limited earthly timeframe inhabited by mortals, Gilgamesh appears to be suggesting that deeds containing a strong element of danger are necessary for addressing the ephemeral nature of the human condition. In this way, his view is juxtaposed against that of Enkidu, who seems to view the rash undertaking of dangerous deeds not as a path towards securing a long legacy, but a means to having a short life.

Gilgamesh's contempt for Enkidu's fear of death places the two friends in opposition for the first time in the narrative since their first meeting. Gilgamesh convinces Enkidu of his point of view, and the pair embarks on the journey together. Gilgamesh's bold views on death at this early point in his story reflect his characterisation as an impetuous, headstrong king—one who is largely focused on his own circumstances. The possibility of dying a “glorious death in battle” is linked to the attainment of a kind of heroic immortality where one's memory may persevere beyond the mortal lifespan (Jacobsen, 1976: 202).

Although the ideal of leaving a “legacy” seems easy enough to interpret in modern times, it is important to consider the possibly anachronistic effect of placing our modern concepts of heroism and fame alongside the appearance of these elements in works of ancient Mesopotamian literature. Differences of culture and context, as well as the challenges of interpreting the fragmented and at times abstruse literature would caution against drawing quick parallels.

For Jacobsen, Gilgamesh's apparent conformation to the ideal of dying in battle and achieving lasting fame shows him living by the “heroic values” of his time (1976: 202). This view seems to find support in the text, where Gilgamesh encourages Enkidu to join him on their perilous adventure (as Jacobsen notes), but also later in the narrative, where the “great deeds” of the pair have given Gilgamesh fame (or notoriety), so that he is recognised even in the far away land on the other side of the Path of the Sun.

As the king of Uruk, and having been born into a family of high status, Gilgamesh's “name” could be expected to live on through ancestor cults and appropriate funerary procedures. Considered in this light, there is a certain irony to Enkidu's attempts to dissuade Gilgamesh from his plan—with no family or royal connections (at this stage in the narrative, prior to his adoption), Enkidu cannot expect his name to live on through his descendants and family connections like his heroic comrade.

The impression given by the text, however, is that it is a different type of fame and legacy that Gilgamesh seeks. The type of fame that Gilgamesh is pursuing is not based on providing a fantastic, royal legacy of great buildings and the pursuit of justice, as might be expected of an “archetypical” Mesopotamian king. Neither is he interested in acquiring fame as a descendant of a great dynasty (with royal and divine ancestors).

Gilgamesh’s pursuit of fame through his actions is focused on achieving a kind of individualised glory—he will travel where no one has gone before, and do things that no one else has done. The means of attaining this individuated glory through deeds is first presented in the prologue of Tablet I:

Gilgameš so tall, perfect and terrible,
Who opened passes in the mountains;
Who dug wells on the hill-flanks,
And crossed the ocean, the wide sea, as far as the sunrise;
Who scoured the world-regions ever searching for life,
And reached by his strength Uta-napišti the Far-away ...
Who is there that can be compared with him in kingly status,
And can say like Gilgameš, ‘It is I am the king’?

(SBV I: 37–46)

Although Gilgamesh’s “great deeds” distinguish his character in the prologue of Tablet I, also present are descriptions of his building works (SBV I: 11–12), his royalty (SBV I: 28–32), and his royal lineage (SBV I: 35–36). In the prologue, the characterisation of Gilgamesh is composed of multiple elements, of which his deeds form an important part.

A further irony can be seen in the contrast provided by Enkidu’s own search for “glory.” In Tablet I, Enkidu tells Shamhat that he will go to Uruk and challenge King Gilgamesh. Enkidu adds that he will “vaunt” himself, and that he will be the mightiest (SBV I: 220–221).

The Akkadian verb used for “vaunting” in this speech from Enkidu is *šarāḫu*, which can be interpreted as “to glorify” (CAD 17.2, 1992). This verb is frequently seen relating to the praise of kings, but can also be related to cultic observances for the dead. Enkidu’s use of the word reflects a repeated expectation of glorifying of himself through his meeting with Gilgamesh, although Shamhat is aware that Enkidu’s anticipation of victory will not match his experience, and may lead to disaster. An emphasis on self-glorification from Gilgamesh and

Enkidu, involving repeated use of the *šarāḫu* verb, can also be seen at the end of Tablet VI, at the time of death of the Bull of Heaven, directly preceding the heroes' divine punishment.

While Gilgamesh attempts to convince Enkidu to seek glory by travelling far from home to meet a legendary opponent, Enkidu's reticence may be partly attributable to his own search for glory in the very recent past. From Enkidu's perspective, he has just done the very thing Gilgamesh suggests!

The encounter between the forest guardian Humbaba and Gilgamesh shows some similarities with Enkidu's confrontation with the young king in Tablet II. Like Enkidu earlier, Gilgamesh develops an empathy for his opponent after their physical confrontation in Tablet V. Enkidu, however, insists that Humbaba must die—possibly to prevent the presence of Humbaba as a rival for his role as Gilgamesh's companion.

This interpretation of the scene is admittedly based on extremely fragmentary evidence, but support may be found in the Sumerian version of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* B (ETCSL 1.8.1.5), which may give some idea of what transpires in the lacuna of Tablet V of the Standard Babylonian Version (George, 2003: 468). In the Sumerian story, Gilgamesh is inclined to kingly piety, and expresses the desire for Humbaba to join the heroes as a servant:

Gilgamesh's noble heart took pity on him. He addressed his slave Enkidu: "Come on, let us set the warrior free! He could be our guide! He could be our guide who would spy out the pitfalls of the route for us! ... He could carry all my things!"

(*Gilgamesh and Huwawa* B, ETCSL 1.8.1.5.1)

Enkidu responds angrily to this suggestion, telling Gilgamesh that Humbaba will make them lose their way. He insists instead on killing Humbaba in the Sumerian versions, as in the Standard Babylonian Version. Enkidu's reaction suggests he perceives Humbaba as a potential rival, a perspective supported in the narrative by the numerous parallels between the two characters. In the pursuit of glory, it would seem that Enkidu believes three is a crowd.

The bold actions of Gilgamesh, in undertaking a journey known to involve potentially fatal conflict, conforms to what Moran calls "the heroic ideal" (2001: 174). For Moran, this section of the text plays an important role in preparing the ground for Gilgamesh's transformation following Enkidu's early death, arguing that Gilgamesh "who once

voiced so eloquently the heroic ideal—declaring his contempt for death and chiding Enkidu for fearing it as long as there was the prospect of dying gloriously and unforgettably—now utterly rejects that ideal and all the values associated with it. Gilgamesh the hero is dead” (Moran, 2002: 174).

Moran is right to emphasise Gilgamesh’s eventual transformation, yet it should be further noted that the “heroic” and fearless Gilgamesh of Tablet II is not without complexity. While Gilgamesh scoffs at the concept of being deterred from the journey due to fear, he does express concern for gaining divine support, and seeks blessings from his mother.

In his speech to Ninsun, Gilgamesh foregrounds the uncertainty of the journey, and the importance of securing his mother’s blessing for ensuring his safe return:

(Gilgamesh says): ‘O Ninsun, I have grown so bold [as to travel]
The distant path to where Humbaba is.
I shall face a battle that I do not know,
I shall ride a road that I do not know.
I hereby beseech you, give me your blessing, so that I may go,
So that I may see your face (again) in safety,
(and) come in through Uruk’s gate glad at heart!

(SBV III: 24–30)

Gilgamesh then further promises to observe the *akitu* festivals “twice in the year” (SBV III: 31–32). The awareness of the danger of the journey does not change Gilgamesh’s mind about his decision to leave, but his efforts to access divine favour before leaving suggests an attitude towards death and danger that is not entirely cavalier. At several points in this book, the soundness of Gilgamesh’s judgement has been called into question, but in his belief that his mother’s blessing is important for the success of his journey—and especially, for his eventual safe return—Gilgamesh is right.

The difference of views between Enkidu and Gilgamesh over the decision to travel to the Forest of Cedars is swiftly reversed in Tablet IV, when Gilgamesh has prophetic dreams during the journey to the forest. The dreams appear to predict trouble ahead, with their imagery of earthquakes, thunder and lightning flashes, yet Enkidu convinces Gilgamesh that the dreams are auspicious.

Scholars have noted the ability of the character of Enkidu to provide a kind of mirror for Gilgamesh. The reversal of the companions' views over the safety and likely success of their journey allows for a closer insight into their relationship with one another, and their similarities.

From their meeting in the Tablet I, the fates of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are intertwined, and through Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh will transform. The connection between the mourner and the departed is clearly expressed in Tablet VII:

To the one who survived grieving was left,
The [deceased] left sorrow to the one who survived.

(SBV VII: 75–76)

This comment, voiced by Gilgamesh, shows the inescapable and universal impact of death. Even those left behind are changed through their contact with death. Gilgamesh's first intimate experience of loss and death in the narrative is the early demise of Enkidu in Tablet VIII. The mirror-like quality of the relationship between the two heroes means that Gilgamesh confronts the reality of his own death when seeing proof of his companion's mortality.

The narrative's audience is aware that Gilgamesh's fear of death at this point is not without reason. The deities had decided first that one of the pair would die as a result of their behaviour, and then selected Enkidu as the hero who would perish. For Gilgamesh, the death of Enkidu is deeply personal both in terms of sudden loss of a loved one, yet also, as David has noted, as a warning of his own mortality (1960: 156). The death of Enkidu in the place of Gilgamesh recalls his creation to be Gilgamesh's "equal" in Tablet I. Enkidu's life and death are divinely planned, to protect the interests of Gilgamesh. Enkidu's death in Gilgamesh's place has undertones of sacrifice and substitution.

Love and loss for Gilgamesh and Ishtar

As an interesting side-note, the "substitution" of Enkidu for Gilgamesh can be seen to hold parallels with the death of Tammuz in the place of Ishtar in the myth of *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld*. The similarities between Gilgamesh and Ishtar have been previously noted, with the energy, combative skills and ambitious drive of both figures leading to the observation in modern scholarship that "they seem to be male and female counterparts" (Abusch, 1999: 453). Ishtar's insatiability and ceaseless efforts to improve her position recalls Gilgamesh and his

yearning to transcend the boundaries of mortality (Abusch, 1999).

In addition to the “substitution” trope, there are several further points common to both stories. In both narratives, the heroic character goes on a quest to discover divine rites, and travels beyond the realms of the upper world to find them. For Gilgamesh, this is the land across the Waters of Death, and for Ishtar it is the Netherworld. For Gilgamesh, the rites are the post-diluvian rituals used by Utanapishtim to restore communication with the divine realm, and for Ishtar, the rites are the powers of the underworld which allow for the continued existence of life after death (Zgoll, 2017).

Both figures undergo “make-overs” which emphasise their high social status and help them return their rites to the upper world. For Ishtar, this is seen in her careful dressing and application of make-up prior to her descent, and for Gilgamesh, his cleaning and dressing prior to his return to Uruk. Both characters lose companions whom they deeply love, and the losses are associated with intense mourning and the appropriate observance of funerary practices. Both of the “substitutes” make dubious choices prior to their deaths, and both can be potentially said to make a return from the Netherworld—with Tammuz acquiring a further substitute in the form of his sister, and Enkidu reappearing (only to die again, possibly temporarily) in Tablet XII.

Although the stories of Gilgamesh and Ishtar both contain many differences (for example, Enkidu is not disloyal to Gilgamesh as Tammuz is to Ishtar), the similarities are worthy of consideration. The success of Gilgamesh and Ishtar in their narrative roles and in their efforts to access sacred rites comes at a great cost in both stories, yet the process of “substitution” is not consubstantial in the two stories. Ishtar is given a range of potential substitutes before choosing Tammuz as her own replacement, while Gilgamesh has only an indirect role in the damnation of Enkidu.

In both cases, the death of a loved one provides the protagonist with the opportunity and drive to supersede earthly limitations, perhaps emphasising the liminality of death. For both characters, the connection to funerary practices extends beyond the literary realm.

Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu

The death of Enkidu holds great narrative significance; it provides the impetus for Gilgamesh’s performance of funerary rites and mourning,

and separates the pair at a time when they have become deeply bonded. Gilgamesh's appreciation of Enkidu is displayed in his long speeches of mourning in Tablet VIII, and he further links the loss of his friend to his search for eternal life later in his travels. Enkidu's appreciation of Gilgamesh is demonstrated less overtly, through the description of the calming of his angry heart in response to a speech from Shamash, where the solar deity praises Enkidu's good fortune in finding Gilgamesh for a companion.

It has been noted that articulations of the emotional bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu are clustered towards the beginning and the end of their time together. Worthington has shown that the deployment of Enkidu's name by Gilgamesh is avoided until after his death, and plausibly suggests that this reflects the determination of the hero for his friend's memory to live on (2011: 406). Enkidu's death has long been recognised as a pivotal moment driving Gilgamesh's search for eternal life, and it is interesting to note the subtle allusion to his continued wish for his friend to also gain immortality.

In [Chapter 4](#), it was observed that Ninsun's proactive and important role in the beginning of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* does not continue throughout the narrative, with the goddess disappearing from the remaining events of the narrative. Considering Ninsun's expertise with religious activities such as divination and sacrifice, and her adoption of Enkidu, her absence is particularly notable following the death of her adopted son.

The long description of mourning and cultic rituals described in Tablet VIII are carried out by Gilgamesh (note Helle's observation of the "repetitiveness of grief" in cuneiform literature, 2015: 88). Although the young king enlists a crowd of mourners to grieve the loss of Enkidu (including the trees and hills surrounding Uruk), Ninsun is not presented as having a role in the post-mortem procedures. While maternal imagery is present in the text, it generally relates to Enkidu's wild birth, and lack of birth parents:

(Gilgamesh speaks): O Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle,
And your father, a wild donkey, [created],
Whom the wild [asses] reared with their milk,
And the animals [of the wild taught] all the pastures!

...

May the pastures lament like your mother!

(SBV VIII: 3–6, 13)

When a non-animal, non-plant character is described with maternal imagery in this passage, it is not Ninsun but Gilgamesh himself (SBV VIII: 61–62). Despite her earlier adoption of Enkidu, Ninsun is not shown mourning his death alongside Gilgamesh, as might be expected of a family member.

In his mourning for Enkidu, Gilgamesh is shown personally performing rituals and sacrifices, and communicating directly with numerous deities. These deities are entrusted with caring for Enkidu in the Netherworld. Earlier in the narrative prior to Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh makes several disastrous attempts to interact with deities, including insulting the goddess of love and making questionable choices for sacrifice, making his careful adherence to religious duty a welcome change of pace for the hero. It is possible that Ninsun's absence in the mourning scenes of Tablet VIII allows Gilgamesh to take an active role in appropriate funerary traditions, foreshadowing his important role as an underworld deity.

Ninsun's absence may also relate to Humbaba's cursing of the heroic pair in Tablet V:

(Humbaba speaks) May the pair of them not grow old,
Apart from his friend Gilgameš, may Enkidu have nobody to
bury him!

(SBV V: 256–257)

Humbaba, as noted in [Chapter 3](#), was in a position to be particularly aware of the problems relating to Enkidu's lack of a human family. Humbaba may have been addressing this point of commonality in his curse. In Humbaba's stating that Gilgamesh and Enkidu will not grow old, the implication is that the pair will be separated prematurely, further enhancing Enkidu's isolation.

The *Letter of Gilgamesh*

The *Letter of Gilgamesh* is a fictional composition, which presents itself as a correspondence from the legendary king, Gilgamesh, to a foreign king. In the letter, Gilgamesh makes many demands for animals, goods and jewels in “completely fantastic and absurd” quantities (Gurney, 1957: 127). It seems clear that the *Letter* contains counterdiscursive elements (Finn, 2017: 141), and Foster's suggestion that the composition may be a type of parody seems probable (2005: 1017).

The hyperbolic requests for goods, which the fictional Gilgamesh states he wishes to use in the construction of a statue for Enkidu,

suggests that Gilgamesh's extravagant mourning for Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is being referenced in the *Letter* for satirical purposes. This view is supported by some overlap in the requests for precious metals which match exactly with Gilgamesh's specifications for a statue of gold and precious stones in Tablet VIII.

The fictional Gilgamesh of the *Letter* then threatens the foreign king with the utter devastation of his lands if the requests are not met, for which the letter's author seems to take little responsibility:

None of this will be my fault.

(*The Letter of Gilgamesh*, IV: 58, Foster, 2005)

The combination of absurd demands and threats of rash action present an unflattering image of the King of Uruk. The *Letter* also perhaps makes an understated point about the excessive quality of Gilgamesh's mourning of Enkidu, contrasted against Gilgamesh's responsibilities in ensuring the economic and social wellbeing of Uruk.

The scene from Tablet VIII is not the only occasion where Enkidu predeceases Gilgamesh. In the Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, as well as in the final tablet of the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu's premature death allows Gilgamesh a special insight into the mysteries of the after-life.

Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld

This book focuses on the literary figure of Gilgamesh, with particular emphasis on the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This emphasis is given to provide some sense of order to the complex literary and material incarnations of the figure of Gilgamesh in the ancient world, and in awareness of the dominance of this version on the hero's modern-day reception. At the same time, however, it is the view here that considering Gilgamesh within the broader context of Mesopotamian culture and literature (particularly with regard to his role as a hero and a king) is important for gaining a clearer understanding of the legendary figure and his adventures. Within this admittedly complicated framework for analysis, we encounter the Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World* (ETCSL 1.8.1.4) (also known as *The Huluppu Tree*), and the closely matching text of Tablet XII of the *Epic's* Standard Babylonian Version.

Tablet XII and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*

As discussed in the Introduction, the earliest known narratives about

Gilgamesh are in the form of five Sumerian poems: *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*, *Gilgamesh and Agga*, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* and *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*. The extant copies of these texts date to the 18th century BCE (in the Old Babylonian period), but it is generally thought that they originate from the Ur III period (George, 2010: 3). The Standard Babylonian Version, which forms the longest extant version of the *Epic*, is thought to have been produced in the late second millennium, with the earliest available texts dating to around the ninth or eighth centuries BCE.

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate over the connection of the Sumerian myths with the later *Epic*, a topic discussed in the Introduction. The linking of the Sumerian story of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* to the Standard Babylonian Version is similarly contentious. In one way, the picture is very clear: in the final tablet of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there is a retelling of the story of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (generally abbreviated to *GEN* in scholarly discourse). More accurately, there is an account of the second half of this story, which describes Enkidu's descent to the Netherworld, and his re-emergence and reunion with Gilgamesh. Yet, the fairly straightforward nature of the connection of the two versions of Gilgamesh narratives in Tablet XII has raised numerous questions concerning the means and motives surrounding the combination of ancient texts.

The text of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as it stands moves from Tablet XI to Tablet XII, picking up the narrative just prior to Enkidu's departure to the Netherworld, and skipping over the primeval history and Inanna's encounters with the Huluppu tree seen in the Sumerian story. It has been widely noted that the final tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* seems an odd fit as a conclusion of the rest of the narrative. Of course, other Sumerian narratives involving Gilgamesh are incorporated, or at least related to, the events of the Standard Version. *Gilgamesh and Humbaba* relates to the journey to the cedar forest in Tablet V and *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* involves a great deal of narrative overlap with Gilgamesh's battle with the cosmic beast in Tablet VI.

The presence of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (or half of it) in Tablet XII is particularly perplexing, however, as it seems at odds with the continuity of the plot of the rest of the *Epic*. In addition, the removal of the first 171 lines of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* undoubtedly changes the meaning and context of the Sumerian story.

At the beginning of Tablet XII of the Standard Babylonian Version, Enkidu is alive and he prepares to go on a dangerous errand for

Gilgamesh. The vital presence of Enkidu in Tablet XII is somewhat jarring to the audience who has witnessed not only his premature demise in Tablet VII, but also the extensive mourning and burial rites that followed on from this event.

Scholars have questioned the choice of the inclusion of the final tablet into the overall story of the *Epic*, considered the possible purpose for which it may have been included, and explored how the final tablet may contribute to the meaning of the Standard Version of the text overall. Alster, for example, has observed that, when the final tablet is considered alongside the rest of the narrative of the Standard Babylonian Version, it may change the emphasis on the theme of mortality (1974: 60):

Our conclusion may be that the Gilgameš epic is not directly concerned with man's request for eternal life, but with life and death as an eternal cycle in which the extraordinary man, the divine ruler, has to take part.

(Alster, 1974: 60)

Returning from the Netherworld is no easy task, and Enkidu's return is not without controversy. Traditionally, the view in scholarship has been that Enkidu's return to the mortal realm is conditional, in that he is now a ghost or a shade. In contrast, it has been argued, notably by Gadotti (2015) and Cooper (2013), that he has returned as a living being, due to not having actually died in the Netherworld, with the story instead presenting Enkidu as having been held in a captive state (Keetman, 2014). It is certainly true that entry into the Netherworld does not invariably result in instant death—in the myth of *Ishtar's Descent*, the goddess is still alive while in the Netherworld prior to her transformation by her sister, Ereshkigal.

Enkidu's return is facilitated by the deities Ea and Shamash. The description in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of visiting various deities to gain their assistance contains striking parallels with a similar scene from the myth of *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld*. Shamash is well suited for assisting in the task of bringing Enkidu back from “the path of no return,” due to his characterisation as a “boundary-crosser extraordinaire” solar deity, traversing the skies and the thresholds between day and night (Sonik, 2012: 389). Shamash opens a chink in the boundary between upper and lower worlds, allowing Enkidu to free himself.

When Enkidu describes his visit to the Netherworld, he begins by

describing the decay of the inhabitants' sexual organs. As Cooper observes (2013: 29–30), this is a surprising place for Enkidu to start his account of what he has seen. Cooper attributes the primacy of this information in Enkidu's description to the need to emphasise an important division between the two worlds; there can be no copulation in the underworld (2013: 30). This interpretation is well supported by comparison with *Ishtar's Descent*, where copulation ceases in both worlds following the goddess's entry to her sister's domain. Sex and death, while often contrastively coupled in antiquity, make for a difficult fit in the Underworld.

Gilgamesh's mortality

Gilgamesh first learns about death in a personal way through Enkidu's death in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Although Gilgamesh has an awareness of his own mortality prior to the death of Enkidu in Tablet VII, it is, as Jacobsen notes, an “abstract” kind of knowledge (1990: 239). With Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh's perception of death becomes personal, in that he relates death directly to himself and his own experience.

For Gilgamesh, Enkidu's demise means that the reality of death arrives in Gilgamesh's world and touches him “where he lives” (Jacobsen, 1990: 239). The hero expresses his new awareness of death clearly at the beginning of Tablet IX:

For his friend Enkidu Gilgameš
was weeping bitterly as he roamed the wild:
‘I shall die, and shall I not then be like Enkidu?
Sorrow has entered my heart.
I became afraid of death ...’

(SBV IX: 1–5)

The brevity of mortal lives is part of the universal human experience. Even for those who live a relatively long time, the human life is short and is played out against a backdrop of systems, cycles, and processes that span much longer expanses of time, such as the seasons and astral movements. The awareness of a limited mortal existence shapes human life—part of the human condition is the difficulty of accepting the inevitability of an end to our current existence.

Gilgamesh's struggles with this issue give his story a timeless significance. Although he is quasi-divine, a king, and hero, Gilgamesh

cannot accept death, and as he strives to shrug off the yoke of mortality, the *Epic*'s audience can consider the problem through the relatively safe perspective of a heroic substitute. Jacobsen has noted Gilgamesh's ability to give voice and heroic form to the fear of death that is common to humans:

In the Gilgamesh Epic it is precisely Gilgamesh's unreasonableness that makes for greatness. The uncommon knowledge in which the epic lives, one which common sense makes us push aside because it serves no purpose: that man can never at heart really accept the fact of death, to that silent and repressed, but powerful and persistent, deep protest in us all Gilgamesh gives voice.

(Jacobsen, 1990: 249)

Gilgamesh's struggle for glory and immortality throughout the *Epic* is shadowed by imagery and allusions relating to his posthumous role in the Netherworld. The audience is continually reminded that the young king's efforts will not succeed in avoiding death, yet the many positive qualities of the narrative compel them to continue with him on his journey.

Fear of death and love of life

The awareness of the finitude of existence arouses fear and sorrow in the heroic protagonist, but also gives him an increased appreciation of living. At first, Gilgamesh's reaction to his companion's death is to roam the wilderness, deep in mourning. However, in both the Old Babylonian Version of the *Epic*, and the Standard Babylonian Version, Gilgamesh's new consciousness of death leads to a deeper valuation of his life. In these two versions of the *Epic*, this new appreciation of life is expressed differently.

At the beginning of Tablet IX in the Standard Version, Gilgamesh sets out to roam the wilderness. Although the parting of Gilgamesh from Uruk and travelling into the wild has been predicted earlier in the text, there is still a sense of abruptness to Gilgamesh's departure. There is a sharp change in pace, mood and subject matter between Tablet VIII and IX (Oppenheim, 1977: 262).

Compared with the lengthy preparations for the hero's previous long journey into the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh leaves Uruk without lengthy consultations, observances of religious rites and forging of weapons, yet his journey will be longer and presents many hazards. Despite Gilgamesh's stated aim to seek Utanapishtim, as Oppenheim

notes, Gilgamesh's rapid departure gives a sense of "fleeing, rather than pursuing a goal" (1977: 262).

In the Old Babylonian Version, Gilgamesh speaks with the solar deity, Shamash, about the necessity for him to soak up the sunlight while he is alive. The sophisticated interchange between Gilgamesh and Shamash is written on the Old Babylonian tablet VA+BM (George, 2003: 272), and it seems to relate life to daylight and death to night.

Gilgamesh's queries surrounding whether light will reach him when he passes to the Netherworld can be read on several levels, from the pragmatic to the more existential. In keeping with the hero's changing perception of death, and with the identity of his partner in dialogue a deity, I would tentatively suggest the text may be raising questions over the role of the divine in the human condition—a question that Gilgamesh will find an answer to in his journey along the Path of the Sun. It is noted, however, that the lack of clear context for this dialogue makes many interpretations possible.

At the beginning of the Old Babylonian tablet, Shamash is said to become worried over Gilgamesh. The young king is described clothing himself in the skin of animals, digging wells and drinking water, and chasing the winds.

It is somewhat unclear, from a modern perspective, whether it is one of these activities in particular, or indeed, any of them, that is the cause for Shamash's concern. In any case, he is described asking Gilgamesh where he is wandering, and tells him that he will not find the life he is seeking. Gilgamesh replies:

After roaming, wandering through the wild,
Within the Netherworld, will rest be scarce?
I shall lie asleep down all the years,
but now let my eyes look on the sun so I am sated with light.
When darkness is hidden, how much light is there?
When may a dead man see the rays of the sun?

(*Gilgamesh* OB VA + BM i: 10–15)

The first part of Gilgamesh's response may be considered as an Old Babylonian articulation of the modern-day expression "I'll sleep when I'm dead." Gilgamesh's concern over his mortality makes him more aware of his "time in the sun." The comparison between the living, who dwell under the sun, and the dead, who live in the shade, is referenced frequently in the narrative. Gilgamesh has at this point in

the text developed a deeper appreciation of the limited time allotted to mortals, and perceives the world differently.

While in the earlier-mentioned dialogue Gilgamesh expresses the desire to fully experience life while he can, it is not until he meets the beer deity Siduri later in same tablet that he is encouraged in practical ways to do this:

You, Gilgameš, let your belly be full!
keep enjoying yourself, day and night! ...
Such is the destiny [of mortal men].

(*Gilgamesh* OB VA + BM iii: 6–7, 14)

Gilgamesh's emotional arc from despair to appreciation of life is even more swiftly spanned in the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic*. Although there is dispute over the meaning of the lines at the beginning of Tablet IX (reproduced later in this chapter), they can be read as a kind of development in the hero's understanding of the reality of the human condition: while life is finite, it holds infinite value. Although the near experience of death has brought Gilgamesh fear, his new awareness of his mortal fragility gives him a greater appreciation and pleasure in his perception of his life.

At the beginning of Tablet IX, Gilgamesh describes how the death of Enkidu has terrified and saddened him, and led to his wandering the wilderness. The hero describes himself travelling swiftly on his way to find Utanapishtim, when he is confronted by lions:

I saw some lions and grew afraid.
I lifted my head, praying to Šin,
To [...the] light of the gods, my supplications went:
"O [Šin and ...] keep me safe!"
[Gilgameš] arose, he awoke with a start: it was a dream!
[...in the] presence of the moon he grew happy to be alive.

(SBV IX: 9–14)

The fragmented state of the evidence allows for a variety of interpretations. It is interesting to note the difference between the named deities who assist Gilgamesh at this crucial turning point in the narrative in two versions of the *Epic*. In the earlier version, Shamash intercedes after Enkidu's death, enquiring after the hero's wellbeing as Gilgamesh wanders the wilds and kills animals. In the Standard Babylonian Version, it is the moon deity Sin who is entreated by Gilgamesh to intercede on his behalf, before the hero kills animals

which he dedicates to his divine protector.

Gilgamesh renewed *joie de vivre* leads him to attack and kill the lions in the next lines of the tablet. While Gilgamesh wants to find a “cure” for his mortality, he is seemingly not afraid to risk death in battle, or through fighting animals (the connection between death anxiety and animal vitality is interestingly explored in Christman, 2008).

This is an important point to note, as later when Gilgamesh finally meets Utanapishtim, he does not engage him in combat. For the composers to have already foregrounded the young king’s readiness for combat in tablets IX and X then gives the audience pause over why he hesitates to launch into an offensive against Utanapishtim.

The Death of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh’s struggles with mortality and the human condition are central themes of the Sumerian narrative, *The Death of Gilgamesh*. Though incomplete, the text is an intriguing part of Gilgamesh’s ancient literary characterisation, particularly as this narrative may inform on the transition of Gilgamesh from a live, mortal hero, to a judge of the underworld.

The Death of Gilgamesh has survived in several versions. Fragments of the story were published by Kramer in 1944, but the narrative in a more complete form has only become available in the past 20 years, through the work of Cavigneaux, and Al-Rawi (2000). Michalowski notes that, among the Gilgamesh stories known from Old Babylonian scribal schools, the *Death of Gilgamesh* is not well attested (2008). The *Death of Gilgamesh* appears to have been “marginal” and is the only one of the group not to appear on any known literary lists (Michalowski, 2008: 18).

The account of the plot, given here, is intended to present the main themes of these fragmented versions and a sense of the narrative’s events, in awareness that several points of the plot remain the subject of debate. The text begins with Gilgamesh close to death. A long sequence of contrasts are given between the hero’s current state, and his former vitality and activities. Gilgamesh’s wisdom, strength, and commitment to justice are praised:

He who was unique in strength has lain down and is never to rise again. He who diminished wickedness has lain down and is never to rise again. He who spoke most wisely has lain down and is

never to rise again.

(*The Death of Gilgamesh*, ETCSL 1.8.1.3)

This section presents a clear picture of the exceptional qualities of the young hero, and his many deeds. As well as celebrating the king, the repeated emphasis in the text on Gilgamesh's impending death reinforces the universality of the human condition, where even the greatest heroes are not immune to aging and death.

The laudation of Gilgamesh's character and deeds at the beginning of the Sumerian narrative hold interesting parallels with the introductory section of the Standard Babylonian Version, where Gilgamesh is introduced to the audience as the hero who surpassed other kings (SBV I: 17). While in *The Death of Gilgamesh* there is the continual reminder of the king's mortality, both texts pause to admire the king's strength, form, wisdom and fantastic adventures.

Gilgamesh, not one to embrace mortality in any incarnation, is presented as close to death and lamenting his current circumstances. Funerary offerings have been made by those close to him, but they bring him little comfort. The potential historicity of depictions of funerary practices is considered in Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi (2000), who note the poetic, rather than historic, emphasis of the composition.

Finally, Gilgamesh lapses into sleep, and dreams of visiting the assembly of the great deities. His deeds are familiar to the deities who meet him, and they list his acts of religious observance, such as the founding of temples. The deities also speak of the hero's distinctive acts of heroism, such as his journey to the Cedar Forest, killing Humbaba, and visiting the Flood survivor, who in this version is called Ziusudra. Although it is not explicitly articulated, the inference is that, even with Gilgamesh's religious piety and his superlative achievements, he will still be subject to the same fate as all mortal creatures. The plausibility of this reading is strengthened by the events which follow in the narrative, where the wisdom deity, Enki, seems to secure a type of immortality for Gilgamesh.

Enki responds to Anu and Enlil, seemingly about the proposal that Gilgamesh might be spared death. Enki reminds them that after the Flood, and the unusual granting of immortality to Utanapishtim and his wife, he was made to swear on heaven and earth that no other human could be allowed to live forever. However, Enki appears to suggest a possible means for providing Gilgamesh a special reprieve—the divinity of his mother, Ninlil. It is then decided that Gilgamesh

will be given an important role in the underworld, ensuring that his high status in life continues in death:

Let Gilgamesh as a ghost, below among the dead, be the governor of the nether world. Let him be pre-eminent among the ghosts, so that he will pass judgments and render verdicts, and what he says will be as weighty as the words of Ninjiczida and Dumuzid.

(*The Death of Gilgamesh*, ETCSL 1.8.1.3)

Despite this improvement in his circumstances, Gilgamesh is still gloomy at the prospect of his demise. He is offered two consolations to improve his mood. The first consolation is that he has always been aware of the mortality that defined humankind. The questionable comfort of this advice perhaps triggers the second consolation, which is that, in death, Gilgamesh will be reunited with all his loved ones, including his “precious one” Enkidu.

Gilgamesh then seems to be comforted that his name will continue through the funerary offerings made by those he loves who remain living. Although extremely fragmentary and difficult to contextualise, it appears that there is a clever juxtaposition between the deities assuring Gilgamesh of a happy reunion with his lost loves, and Gilgamesh’s realisation that his living relations will allow him a type of legacy. This legacy seems to cheer Gilgamesh more than his role in the Netherworld, and further lionises the importance of appropriate mourning and funerary rituals.

Conclusion

Death is part of human reality. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, death is considered in a nuanced manner that is well suited to the literary sophistication of the text and the complicated view of the afterlife in Mesopotamian culture. The *Epic* engages with the gravity of death even while the hero desperately searches for alternatives to the finitude of life. The *Epic*’s hero shows a range of responses to death—from cavalier bravado in the beginning of the narrative, to terror and horror following Enkidu’s death, to acceptance at the end of Tablet XI.

In his developing knowledge of death, Gilgamesh also shows growth. Although the hero fears death, he is also curious about the subject, and works to broaden his understanding on the topic. The myths of the *Death of Gilgamesh* and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* present the young king seeking to understand what lies

beyond the limits of mortal life.

In this chapter, the theme of death in narratives involving Gilgamesh has been shown to be a powerful and dynamic one. The hero and the *Epic* display a range of stances towards life, death, and the afterlife, subtly connecting the theme of death to the consideration of wisdom in the [previous chapter](#). Love (considered in [Chapter 4](#)) is similarly significant for understanding death in the world of Gilgamesh. While the certainty of death creates the inescapable risk of loss that accompanies love, it is the mourning practices of loved ones which may provide some sense of continuity between the experiences of living mortals and those who have crossed to the afterlife. The importance of good mourning practices for the dead is integral to Gilgamesh's connection with death, but it is a theme employed in a nuanced manner—both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are presented with awareness that an assurance of good treatment following death does not entirely extinguish the powerful human drive towards continued survival.

Gilgamesh is an outsized hero who fights exceptional battles against fantastic foes, yet in his ceaseless struggle against death, his unusual strength and daring are of little use. It is Gilgamesh's divine connections and his royalty that provide him with some measure of protection against his mortality, and allow him a privileged position in the afterlife. Through his struggle to evade death, Gilgamesh displays an awareness and love of the miraculous qualities of mortal life.



Gilgamesh afterwards



Reception and influence

Gilgamesh is the best-known early hero of ancient Mesopotamia. Despite the extreme antiquity of Gilgamesh's story, and the uniqueness of Mesopotamian culture, the *Epic's* hero continues to provide a lens through which modern audiences can consider questions of power, wisdom, and the nature of the human condition. The presence of universal themes in *Gilgamesh*, such as the significance of love, family, and mortality, give the story continued relevance beyond the scope of academia, to the broader community. Further, the increasing scholarly sensitivity to the ecological aspects of *Gilgamesh* makes the study of this ancient poem an opportune endeavour, in a time of climate change and increased ecological imbalance. Also of importance is the growing global recognition of the significance of the preservation of the literary, artistic, and cultural legacy of the "cradle of civilisation," in the face of the recent threats to its heritage.

This chapter explores the reception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, both in ancient and modern times. The nature of the *Epic's* impact on other great literary works of the ancient world is a leviathan area of scholarship, with widely divergent views in the academic community regarding the scope, type, and significance of its influence.

The topic of reception contains multiple challenges. Notably, the authors of ancient works rarely comment explicitly on matters of influence, creating significant ambiguity. There are further challenges involved in working with a developing area of study and an incomplete and fragmented historical record. With these issues in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ability to credibly demonstrate any influence from *Gilgamesh* to other texts has at times been called into question.

The topic of reception is in some ways an exploration of context. The ideas of the ancient mythological and religious world did not, in general terms, exist or have their geneses in isolation. Ancient narratives frequently involve multiple traditions exerting influence on one another while adapting to different cultures and geographic environments. Transcultural interaction was a complex process that resulted in increased creativity, diversity, and narrative richness.

“Mesopotamia” is itself a blanket term, generally connoting an area of intense geographical, linguistic, political, social, and cultural diversity. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* grew and developed from this diversity, and considering how the narrative may have been involved in a cultural exchange of ideas is useful for understanding the context of the many compositions featuring the world’s first hero.

Tracing the reception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in modern times is an increasingly popular area of scholarship, with several articles and books on the subject becoming available in recent years. Exploring the circumstances of the *Epic*’s rediscovery involves considering how this historical event led to the formation and development of the scientific field of Assyriology (a general term for the academic discipline devoted to the study of Mesopotamia).

While the discipline of Assyriology is focused on the analysis of the records of some of the world’s earliest civilisations, the discipline is itself a relatively new field, being a little over 150 years old. The long traditions of Classics and Biblical Studies in academia provide a contrast to the size and span of Assyriology as a field of study.

By considering possible areas of contact, influence, or similarity, an inadvertent emphasis may be placed on what might seem “familiar” in the cuneiform world, rather on the distinctive elements of Mesopotamian culture. As noted by Rochberg, modern discoveries of parallels, relations, and heritage cannot define the identity of an ancient civilisation, and should not overshadow “the fact that some aspects of Mesopotamian culture are not characteristically Western” (Rochberg, 2016: 28–29). Contextual circumscription by our own cultural environment creates a natural bias when considering foreign civilisations, artistic works, and history. Developing a greater awareness of this bias allows for the consideration of new perspectives on the cultural environment of antiquity, and that of the present day.

The topic of the reception of *Gilgamesh* is sufficiently large to preclude detailed treatment here, and the subject has been well considered elsewhere (see especially Ziolkowski, 2011, and Damrosch, 2008). In keeping with the aim of this volume to provide an accessible

entry to the world of Gilgamesh, the reception history of Gilgamesh is briefly outlined. The focus here is on the diversity of the hero's reception in the ancient and modern world.

In this chapter, we first consider the literary influence of Gilgamesh in the ancient world, and then explore the nature of Gilgamesh's reception in modern popular culture, including the hero's appearances in books, television shows, theatre, and comic books. The diversity of responses to the *Epic* and its hero demonstrates the continued relevance of the ancient hero in the present day, as well as the timeless qualities of its themes and characters.

Gilgamesh and the Bible

The fame of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* extended throughout the Near East of antiquity. The story's popularity is well attested by the broad-ranging dispersal of copies found in archaeological excavations, with copies found in a variety of locations from Iraq, to Turkey, to Megiddo, and it is thought that biblical authors used knowledge of Gilgamesh's narrative to create allusions and contrasts in the Hebrew Bible (O'Connell, 1988: 413–414).

The knowledge of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in ancient Canaan (a geographical space corresponding with areas in the present day under the jurisdiction of the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority) may not have been developed through direct contact, with Horowitz and Oshima suggesting the greater probability that contact occurred through Western intermediaries:

The academic tradition of the materials (in Canaan) ... shows signs of ongoing contact with developments in the Mesopotamian scribal tradition, as well as some more local features ... Megiddo 1 preserves part of none other than the most popular Akkadian literary work, the Gilgamesh Epic (latest edition: George 2003). Yet this is not necessarily proof of direct contact with Babylonian and Assyrian scribes. Rather, it is more likely that developments in Mesopotamia were transmitted to the scribes of Canaan through intermediaries in the west, for example, the scribal community at Ugarit, where traditional Sumerian-Akkadian lexical lists often occur with added translations into West-Semitic, Hittite and/or Hurrian.

(Horowitz and Oshima, 2006: 18)

The likely dispersion of literary motifs and details through intermediaries creates further ambiguity for tracing potential areas of overlap and influence between *Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew Bible. Further, the literary sophistication of the Hebrew Bible means that references to *Gilgamesh* may appear subtly, and well-known features of the *Epic* may have been reconfigured to suit the literary or other aims of the biblical composers.

The comparison of Near Eastern and biblical literature is a field which has provided much useful scholarship, and offers continuing potential to better illuminate both areas of research. *Gilgamesh* and the Bible have been connected in scholarship in multiple ways, although the historical bonds are not always overtly presented or easily traced. The modern-day reception and recovery of the *Epic* was propelled by its biblical parallels (a fascinating account of this process of development may be found in Cregan-Reid, 2013).

Perhaps due to the circumstances surrounding its origins, the field of Assyriology was initially heavily concentrated on unravelling possible connections between the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamian literature and culture. Although these literary works have a modern history of scholarly comparison stretching over a period of 150 years, the contrast between biblical texts and cuneiform literature is not without controversy. Determining points of influence, contact or discourse between ancient cultures, and their artistic works, is an intricate and at times delicate matter.

Despite its many benefits, the search for Near Eastern parallels in biblical literature has a complicated and unruly history. A tendency in earlier works to overstate possible connections has created a corresponding hesitancy in later scholarship to acknowledge even the most overt similarities. In this ungainly manner, the scholarly debate lurches onwards, with the degree to which Near Eastern texts are connected to biblical literature a matter of debate, but also nebulously connected to the historiographic period of the scholarship in which the debate continues. As Lambert observed, “fashions” have dominated approaches to the Hebrew Bible, with uneven results (2016: 216).

As well as possessing historiographical connections, scholars have noted that the Hebrew Bible and *Gilgamesh* show points of commonality (a book-length exploration of this issue is provided in Alexander Heidel’s classic work, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, first published in 1946). From the very inception of the study of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when George Smith observed parallels with

the biblical Flood, *Gilgamesh* has been contrasted and companioned with the Bible.

Gilgamesh and Genesis

In this chapter, the consideration of the relationship between *Gilgamesh* and biblical literature is focused on the Book of Genesis, particularly the Flood narrative (a more detailed account of *Gilgamesh* and Genesis more broadly may be found in Forest, 2007). In the prologue to his comparison of ancient Flood narratives, Heidel observes that the narratives of the Flood form the most overt parallels between the Hebrew Bible and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and that the Flood stories provide “the most remarkable parallels between the Old Testament and the entire corpus of cuneiform inscriptions from Mesopotamia” (Heidel, 1946: 224).

Decades after the publication of Heidel’s work, the situation remains the same, despite the rapid expansion of the field of Assyriology and numerous new discoveries (Tsumura, 1994: 52). The Flood narratives of *Gilgamesh* and Genesis have inspired an abundance of scholarly research, and played a critical role in the modern reception of *Gilgamesh*, and the development of the field of Assyriology.

Although the Flood narratives provide a starting point for scholarly consideration of the connection between *Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew Bible, other parts of *Gilgamesh* have also proven interesting subjects for academic work—although the parallels are by no means universally accepted. The search for the herb of immortality in *Gilgamesh*, and the theft of this plant by a snake, has drawn comparisons with the biblical narrative of the forbidden fruit, and the temptation by the serpent (Genesis 3). Further similarities have been suggested between the civilisation of Enkidu by Shamhat, and the civilisation of Adam and Eve. As with the account of the Deluge, the search for Mesopotamian parallels with the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2–5) has been a feature of *Gilgamesh*’s reception from the time of George Smith. The early exploration by Smith of possible comparisons with the Fall from Genesis and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was expanded upon by Jastrow, in his article “Adam and Eve in Babylonian Literature” (1899).

At the time of Jastrow’s writing, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* had only been recovered for just over 20 years, and was much less complete

than more modern versions. Jastrow provided an analysis of the similarities between aspects of *Gilgamesh* and Genesis, and argued for a common descent for the stories of Adam and Eve, and Enkidu and Shamhat (who he refers to as Eabani and Ukhat respectively) (1899). Jastrow's work is significant particularly in terms of methodology. Building on the influential work of Gunkel (1895), Jastrow suggests that there may have been indirect contact between the two narratives at an early stage, perhaps through common folklore, resulting in a situation where the differences between the two works of literature may be as significant for study as the similarities (1899). (For a recent treatment of suggested parallels between *Gilgamesh* and Adam and Eve, with further bibliography, see Forest, 2007. For the comparison of Gilgamesh's quest for immortality and the biblical narrative of Eden, see Römer, 2013).

The Flood narratives

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is not the only Mesopotamian text involving a Flood narrative. The story of *Atrahasis*, considered to be one of the masterpieces of Babylonian literature (Pettinato, 2005: 598), is known from several versions, and thought to be an earlier account of the Flood (McKeown, 2008: 16). It is generally accepted that Tablet XI of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been interpolated with a version of the *Atrahasis* story, with this addition perhaps added by Sin-leqi-unnini (George, 2008). In keeping with the focus of this volume, emphasis here will be on the Flood narrative as it appears in *Gilgamesh*.

In Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the Flood. He recounts how the Mesopotamian gods decided to cause the Flood. The reason for this is “to diminish the people” in *Gilgamesh* (SBV XI: 188–195), but elsewhere it appears that the humans made too much noise, and disrupted the sleep of Enlil (*Atrahasis* I: 352–359, in Lambert and Millard, 1969: 67). The deities swear an oath to keep their plan a secret, but Ea, the god of wisdom, circumnavigates this directive by telling the plan to the wall of Utanapishtim's house. Ea instructs Utanapishtim (through the wall) to build a boat to escape the coming Flood:

Demolish the house, build a boat!
Abandon riches and seek survival!

Ea tells Utanapishtim to bring the seed of all living creatures onto his boat, and specifies some of the craft's dimensions. Utanapishtim agrees to do as instructed, but asks how he might answer people who will question his sudden interest in boat-building. Ea tells him an answer which seems to be a type of riddle about the upcoming Deluge.

Utanapishtim gives a detailed account of the boat-building, which is carried out by a team of craftspeople, and Utanapishtim finishes their work by oiling the boat, completing this day-long task just before sundown. Utanapishtim then loads up the boat with riches, seeds, his family, animals and creatures of the wild, and people possessing skills and crafts of every type. Utanapishtim's choice to bring gold and silver (and the placement of these first on his list, prior to his kinfolk) might have been intended to raise a few eyebrows, given the directive from Ea that he abandon his wealth.

In any case, the rain starts, and a description is given of several deities contributing to the force of the storm. The force of the storm is sufficiently great to frighten even the gods, who leave their homes on earth and retreat to the highest part of heaven. The storm lasts for six days and seven nights.

The mother goddess, Belit-ili, and the other deities are presented weeping with remorse when the destruction of the storm is revealed. After the storm dies down, Utanapishtim discovers all of the people have "turned to clay" (SBV XI: 135). He sends out three birds to check if the water is receding. When the last bird does not return, Utanapishtim finds it safe to disembark from the ark. He offers a sacrifice to the deities, who crowd around to consume it. They rebuke Enlil for causing the Deluge (and offer various suggestions on how he might have instead gone about his efforts at population control). The deities form an assembly and agree never to flood the world in the same way again, and they bestow special immortality on Utanapishtim and his wife.

Readers familiar with the Book of Genesis will have likely noted a number of similarities with the Flood story of Genesis 6–9. While it is generally agreed there are several parallels between the two texts the relationship between the texts is "difficult to determine" (Wenham, 1994: 445).

Among many comparisons of the two texts, frequently noted are

the divine commitment to the destruction of (at least most of) humanity, the selection of a named individual to ensure the continuation of life, the instruction to build an ark and its subsequent construction, the inclusion of animals on the ark, the Flood, the use of birds to test whether the waters have sufficiently receded for disembarkation, the sacrifices following the Flood and the divine commitment not to diminish humanity with a Flood in the future.

The structure of both stories is similar, with Genesis 6–8 “paralleling perfectly the Babylonian flood story tradition recorded in Gilgameš Tablet XI, point by point, and in the same order,” although with some added elements that are not common to both narratives (Rendsburg, 2007: 115). While contrasting the two Flood accounts, Rendsburg notes that the accepted cause of similarities between the two versions in biblical scholarship is that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* account of the Babylonian Flood story is the source of the Genesis Flood Story (2007: 121). For Moran, the Deluge makes “more sense” in Mesopotamia than in Israel (2002: 74). The view which assigns a Mesopotamian background for the biblical story stems from the perception of the earlier date of the Babylonian Flood accounts, and the idea that the Flood story “fits the geo-hydrological conditions of Mesopotamia more than those of Palestine” (Chen, 2013 with additional bibliography).

Of course, there are numerous differences between the two accounts, such as the contrast in the number of deities involved in planning the Flood in the two stories, the vivid presentation of the storm in the Mesopotamian story which is virtually non-existent in the biblical text, and Utanapishtim’s use of deceptive riddling to conceal his divine directive.

These differences are explained by Rendsburg as the resulting from the “distinctively Israelite theological position inherent to Genesis 6–8” (2007: 116). In his analysis of the theology of the Flood narratives, Clines observes the punitive aspect of the Flood, resulting from catastrophic human sin, gives a distinctive dimension to the biblical account (1998: 510–513).

It is interesting, from this perspective, to consider possible contexts for the differences between the two texts (explored in depth in Walton, 2003). The mirroring of deity and human in each text is worth noting, with an emphasis on piety (what Speiser calls a “strong moral motivation” 1964: 55) in the Genesis account (“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth...” Gen 6:5) (“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation ... Gen 6:9), and the

clever deceptions employed by Ea and Utanapishtim. This emphasis may be partly related to the perspective from which the story is told in the two literary works, with the narrator providing the Flood account in Genesis, and the Flood survivor giving his own depiction of the story in *Gilgamesh*.

The relationship of the Flood stories to the surrounding narrative is different in both texts, and this is of key importance to the differences between them. In *Gilgamesh*, the emphasis is on the secret wisdom of the Flood survivor, an emphasis reflected in the clever behaviour of Ea and Utanapishtim. In Genesis, the Flood account is “intended to reveal the character of God” (Walton, 2003: 323), resulting in a greater focus on holiness and morality.

It is interesting to note that there is a greater emphasis on communication in the *Gilgamesh* account, with Utanapishtim and Ea in dialogue with one another, but Noah remaining silent. Noah’s silence is not broken until Genesis 9. In Genesis 9, Noah’s son Ham sees him naked, leading Noah to curse Ham’s son, Canaan. This narrative episode again foregrounds the widespread consequences of human sin, as Noah’s son Ham, who performs an act of violation, is “mysteriously displaced” by his son Canaan in Noah’s curse (Alter, 1996: 40).

Communication is also emphasised in the narrative style of the Flood narrative of *Gilgamesh*, where Utanapishtim and Gilgamesh are presented in a dialogue about the Flood. This contrasts with the biblical Flood story, where the narrator’s account of Genesis is more one-sided. In both texts, however, the survival of humanity is contingent on positive relationships between an individual and their deity and the individual’s obedience to divine instruction.

Gilgamesh beyond Genesis

It is generally agreed that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has, to some extent, had cultural contact with the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes. The extent of this contact, and its influence, remain contested areas of scholarly discussion (the similarities, differences, and cultural contexts for the two works are succinctly considered in de Savignac, 1978. See more recently the analysis of Suriano, 2017).

Arguably the most overt connection between the two works of literature is in the advice given to Gilgamesh by Siduri, and in the advice given by Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 9. The two passages are quoted here:

You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
Keep enjoying yourself, day and night!
Every day make merry,
dance and play day and night!
Let your clothes be clean!
Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water.
Gaze on the little one who holds your hand,
Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
Such is the destiny [of mortal men].

(*Gilgamesh* OB VA + BM iii: 6–14)

7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. 8 Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 9: 7–9)

It would be precipitous to surmise that the similarities between these two passages necessarily result from cultural contact or any direct contact between the texts. Good advice seems to have a certain timeless quality, particularly when it is expressed in broad terms that may be applicable to a range of situations and periods. The fluidity of the subject of wisdom is one of the more notable aspects of the genre (considered in [Chapter 5](#)). It is interesting to note that the text from Ecclesiastes seems closer to the Old Babylonian Version on its presentation of the subject of wisdom, than the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic* (noted by Van der Toorn, 2007), although the composition of Ecclesiastes is thought to date from a chronological period closer to the later version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The Book of Giants

There are only a handful of non-cuneiform references to Gilgamesh. Earlier, we explored the connection of Gilgamesh to a great Flood. The Flood narrative from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* remains the most overt connection between the Hebrew Bible and the Mesopotamian epic narrative, some hundred years after it was first noted by George Smith. The name of the heroic protagonist of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may be found in a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls known as the *Book of*

Giants, also in the context of the Flood.

The *Book of Giants* is written in Aramaic, a Semitic language once widely used as a lingua franca in the Ancient Near East. In the *Book of Giants*, Gilgamesh is named as one of the giants killed by the biblical Flood.

The *Book of Giants* contains a narrative involving the exploits of the giants, and describes visions they receive and their reactions to them. The *Book of Giants* is made up of several extremely fragmentary texts, and it is difficult to assign order to the narrative, or to be certain of its story, themes, or shape. The composition gives the names of several giants: Ohyah, Hahyah, Aḥiram, Mahaway, Gilgamesh, and Ḥobabish. The latter two resonate with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The name Hobabish derives from Humbaba, the powerful guardian slain by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and this figure also appears in 4Q203 (Puech, 2001: 32). Gilgamesh's interest in the interpretation of dreams in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is also seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls; Gilgamesh and Ohyah appear to have a discussion in texts 4Q530 and 4Q531 about the challenges they face and dream interpretation (as well as the depressing nature of foreboding dreams).

Scholars have considered the appearance of figures from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the *Book of Giants*, and plausibly suggested that the author of the *Book of Giants* drew upon (or perhaps “creatively appropriated,” see Goff, 2009: 53) pre-existing characters from the Mesopotamian epic tradition, to parody them for polemical purposes (see Jackson, 2007).

The interplay of Ancient Near Eastern Flood traditions in the *Book of Giants* has been recently considered by Crone (2016), who compares the figures of Atrahasis and Enoch. There is some literary continuity between the *Book of Giants* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the focus on the reporting and interpreting of prophetic dreams, and of course, the Flood.

Gilgamesh and Classical literature

Although the knowledge of the Gilgamesh lapsed in the first two millennia of the common era, it did not disappear entirely. While the cuneiform evidence for the hero lay dormant beneath the sands in ancient Iraq, traces of the *Epic* and its hero lingered. In cultural memory, visual sources, and literature, some awareness of the hero and his epic could still be glimpsed. These traces of Gilgamesh are

directly observable in a few references to the hero in some sources from the Classical period and later. Indirectly, traces of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* remained present, but any influences on contemporaneous or later literature from a variety of cultures and historical periods, such as the epic literature of Homer, are difficult to define.

While there are few direct references to Gilgamesh in Classical sources, Gilgamesh appears in Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals*, discussed in [Chapter 3](#). In a study of the literary reception of Gilgamesh, Henkelman has argued that the orally-transmitted character of Gilgamesh survived through the work of Aelian well into the common era:

When the Gilgameš Epic was uncovered and recognised in the 1870s, and when finally, the name 'Gilgameš' was read correctly in 1890, the name Γίλγαμος ("Gilgamos") was already there all the time. Sayce just needed to check his Teubner edition of Aelian to find it.

(Henkelman, 2006)

The analysis of indirect traces of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in other ancient literature hinges is a somewhat subjective exercise. As Dalley has astutely observed, even the most compelling similarities can be dismissed as coincidental, through the perspective that similar phases of development can deliver parallel inspirations (2017: 116). Dalley rightly argues that to improve scholarly consensus and reduce the potential for subjectivity, what is required is to uncover the mechanisms of contact that led to the demonstrated result (2017: 116).

George has given an impressively thorough overview of the indirect connections that have been made in the literary history of the *Epic* (2003), and this will not be improved upon here. Instead, a brief overview will be given of some of the most well-known parallels that have been drawn with *Gilgamesh*, to illustrate the potentially vast reach of the *Epic* in ancient times—and the breadth of scholarship on the issue.

As one of the world's earliest works of literature, *Gilgamesh's* extreme antiquity and wide fame means that a potential path for the transmission of its story can be theorised in a wide range of directions. Further, indirect references in literature may be subtle, and may rework parts of the earlier narrative to better fit a historically or culturally different setting. This does not mean that the indirect

references should not be sought—this kind of interplay in literature holds the potential to illuminate the similarities and differences of cultures, as well as to gain a deeper insight into the literature in question. What this does mean is that even the most plausible connections between ancient literary works must be approached from a critical stance. With these caveats in mind, we will consider the *Arabian Nights*, Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and the myths of Herakles as potentially holding indirect references to the Mesopotamian epic.

Homer

The heroes of Homeric epic literature have long been noted for their similarities to the protagonist of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The consideration of parallels between *Gilgamesh* and the writings ascribed to Homer became a topic of academic interest “almost as soon as the contents of the Babylonian poem were available in a reliable form” (George, 2003: 55) (for a detailed bibliography on the topic of Homer and *Gilgamesh*, see Musiał, 2013). While the comparison of Greek epic poetry with *Gilgamesh* has a reasonably robust academic history, other Mesopotamian poetry and narratives have received less attention. Addressing this imbalance is a developing field of scholarship.

It has come to general acceptance that the literature of the Ancient Near East had a significant influence on Greek literature from the 9th century BCE onwards. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is thought to have indirectly influenced the shape of Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, a theory that is supported by the appearance of similar characters, themes and events in the works of Homer and *Gilgamesh*.

In 1972, Sasson considered the importance of the oral tradition to both Greek and Mesopotamian literature, and suggested possible lines along which the transmission of similar motifs may have travelled (Sasson, 1972). A recent paper by Musiał has raised the possibility of more direct contact between the epics, due to the observation of the presence in Homer of fragments of text which appear to have been “copied” from the Mesopotamian epic (2013), and further connections have been traced by Dalley (2017). The evidence for the influence of *Gilgamesh* on the works of Homer is sufficiently sturdy to have provided the foundation for further scholarly analyses exploring considerations of stylistic and narrative choices in the application of ancient tropes, and how these reflect on meaning and structure (see Abusch, 2001).

That a multitude of differences may be found between the works of Homer and *Gilgamesh* is not surprising, due to many differences in context and culture. While noting the distinctiveness of the two traditions, some similarities between the narratives have been the repeated focus of scholarly investigation (well summarised by Steymans, 2010: 331–334). The story of Odysseus and Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey* is considered to hold close resemblances to the episode of Gilgamesh and Siduri—the lone female plies the inconsolable hero-wanderer with drink and sends him off to a place beyond the sea to a place for honoured people. To prepare for the voyage, both heroes must cut down and trim timbers. Humbaba's murder by Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been compared to the blinding of Polyphemus (Lord, 1997), and Ishtar's romantic interest in Gilgamesh has been likened with the adventures of Odysseus with Circe and Calypso.

Although somewhat nebulous, *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* share an overarching emphasis on identity which is worthy of further exploration. This is not a new observation: in 1964, Webster raised the possibility that the depiction of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* was influenced by the earlier model of Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Webster, 1964). Webster considered several similarities between the literary traditions, and suggested their cause as possible Mycenaean borrowings of the *Gilgamesh* stories, potentially through transcultural contact with the Hittites (1964: 84). Webster astutely noted that the heroic protagonists of both epics would be entirely unrecognisable without their respective mothers and companions (1964). More recently, the significance of the mother figures of Thetis and Ninsun, and their similar roles in supporting and legitimising their heroic sons, has been explored by Musiał (2013: 44–46).

For Homer's Odysseus, the question of identity is entwined with the concept of "home"—those who know the Greek hero best are less likely to be fooled by his disguises, and the characters' shared history provides a pathway for Odysseus' return to leadership in Ithaca. Similarly, Gilgamesh's identity is tied to his role as king of Uruk, his "home," and to those closest to him. Meeting Utanapishtim, who understands Gilgamesh's royal role, helps to put him back on the track homewards. Further, for both heroes, their long journeys prove seminal, with Gilgamesh and Odysseus both using the stories of their challenges to assert their identity while away from home. Although the two epics cannot be expected to engage with the theme of identity in the same way, it is interesting to consider the connection in the

Herakles

Gilgamesh is one of several Near Eastern heroic characters who have been likened to the classical hero, Herakles. The Near Eastern heroic palette contributing to the image of Herakles is not limited to Gilgamesh, with Mesopotamian iconography from as early as 2500 BCE showing a hero strangling two large snakes in either hand (famously an accomplishment of Herakles), or fighting a Hydra-type beast (Stafford, 2012: 13). The parallels between Gilgamesh and Herakles specifically are related most closely to the monster-fighting activities of the heroes (Stafford, 2012: 2).

Gilgamesh and Herakles have both been described as “liminal” characters. They share an interest in long journeys (both containing an element of redemption), have memorable fights with lions, dress in leonine skins, and get along well with solar deities. It has been noted that the activity of lion-fighting is perhaps better suited to a Near Eastern narrative setting than a Greek one, due to a dearth of historical lions in ancient Greece (West, 1997). The heroic activity of lion-fighting is often noted as one shared by Gilgamesh, Herakles, and Samson in the biblical Book of Judges. Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu have been compared to Samson since the late 19th century.

The similarities between Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Samson, and Herakles have caused them to be conceptually linked to the medieval “wild man,” an archetypal figure who lives on the borders of civilisation, uses natural or crude weapons, has an exceptional sexual appetite, and is very hairy. It is thought the medieval wild man archetype is based on much earlier folk and fairy tales, and Mobley argues Gilgamesh and Enkidu stand at the very earliest known stage of this tradition (2006, see also Bartra, 1994 for an overview of the “wild man” archetype’s history). Mobley also notes that the literary trope of a descent into “wildness” due to grief may be observed in the tradition of the death of Merlin’s brothers, but it is not, as some have argued, a medieval innovation, with the theme of intense mourning triggering wild behaviour preceding the extant Merlin traditions by more than two millennia (Mobley, 1997: 218).

West observes a further Near Eastern connection relating to Herakles, with the Greek hero being suckled by the goddess Hera (West, 1997). While West does not draw the connection directly, the

suckling of Gilgamesh by his divine mother, Ninsun, is a repeated trope throughout the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. With the example of divine suckling, it is interesting to consider how heroic points of commonality may be used creatively to illustrate character. While Herakles' biting of Hera's nipple typifies the animosity between the pair, Gilgamesh's nursing with Ninsun evokes intimacy, protection, and legitimacy.

Arabian Nights

Dalley has built a good case for elements of the Gilgamesh narrative influencing stories found in the *Arabian Nights* (1997). Also known as the *1001 Nights*, the *Arabian Nights* are a collection of stories and folk tales collected over many centuries, thought to have originated in ancient India and evolving to contain Persian stories. The collection of stories is linked by the overarching frame story. Dalley notes elements of one of the tales, the *Tale of Buluqiya*, holds close parallels with *Gilgamesh*.

In this story, the young king Buluqiya sets out with a faithful companion to search for immortality and obtain the ring of Solomon. Buluqiya's friend dies an untimely death just as success is within their reach. The king's travels lead him through a subterranean passage, to a kingdom where the trees have emerald leaves and ruby fruit. He meets the far-distant king Sakhr who has gained immortality in a way which is now impossible for Buluqiya—by drinking from the fountain of life guarded by Al-Khidr (an Islamic sage thought to be a later version of Utanapishtim). Buluqiya is then sent back home.

Dalley's recognition of similarities between the *Arabian Nights* and *Gilgamesh* provides an example of the rich cultural interplay in the narratives and thought of the ancient world. Yet, the connection of the two narratives is not universally accepted. George has argued that the points of similarity between *Gilgamesh* and the *Tale of Buluqiya* are not sufficiently distinctive to offer proof of a connection (2003). For George, the surging tide of literary works separating the two narratives means charting a course between them risks becoming an entirely speculative exercise (2003).

In his discussion of motifs from *Gilgamesh* in the tale of "Alexander and the Water of Life," Tesei suggests that the differences between Gilgamesh and Buluqiya's adventures may be due to some cross-pollination with Mesopotamian myths involving descents to the

Underworld (2010: 426). Again, this is difficult to prove, yet through endeavouring to find transcultural literary links, the continued consideration of the distinctive contexts of the literature is required, and the exploration remains worthwhile.

Evidence of influence from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is found in Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals* (considered in [Chapter 3](#)). This story appears to mix elements of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* with other Mesopotamian epic literature, such as the story of Etana. This kind of confluence of influence does not make easier work of identifying possible pathways of cross-cultural discourse, however, if these two examples were evidence of a wider trend, it would provide a useful perspective on the manner in which influences could be absorbed, combined, and reinterpreted. Although it is unlikely that the debate will be proven on either side, what is clear is the continued currency of the story-telling motifs found in *Gilgamesh*—motifs which, as George notes, may predate their usage in the world's first tragic epic (2003: 67).

Gilgamesh in popular culture

The universalism of Gilgamesh's quest for immortality, search for the "fountain of youth," and his epic love are likely contributors towards the hero's continued appeal for modern day audiences. Many tropes from Gilgamesh's stories, such as a quest for immortality or rejuvenation, are explored in modern day popular culture. Indeed, heroes, with their "larger-than-life" adventures and abilities, have arguably never been more popular. The success of the Marvel and DC superhero films reflects the continued appeal for modern day audiences of stories of human actors who are endowed with exceptional, at times supernatural, abilities and challenges. In this way, Gilgamesh's legacy as an archetypical "all-too-human superman" (Altes, 2007: 191) has a long reach.

The continued popularity of *Gilgamesh*, and its appreciation and augmentation by new audiences was thoughtfully considered by Kluger. Through the instigation of her teacher and collaborator C. G. Jung, Kluger explored an interpretation of the *Epic* rooted in the developing field of psychological analysis. In terms of the *Epic*'s continued appeal, Kluger said:

It doesn't seem to be mere chance that in modern times publications on the Gilgamesh Epic have multiplied, not only in the field of Assyriology, but also in poetic works, literary

compositions, and artistic representations. It is as though our time has to find its own understanding of such statements of eternal human concern, in order to find the specific meaning or place of our own epoch in the process of a growing enlargement of consciousness, which is the ultimate meaning and goal of myth.

(Kluger, 1991: 18)

Unlike Classical heroes, such as Hercules, Gilgamesh's adventures were largely lost from popular awareness for almost two millennia. This means that there are particular challenges to establishing Gilgamesh's influence on present day works, as knowledge of the legendary Mesopotamian heroes, unlike their Classical counterparts, cannot be assumed by the creators of modern works of popular culture.

It has also been argued that many of the motifs from *Gilgamesh*, and other Mesopotamian epics, may have been part of ancient story-telling traditions, which have been since been lost but may have influenced later writers independently of the *Epic*. With these caveats in mind, it is perhaps no coincidence to note some increase in potential references to Gilgamesh in modern works which engage with biblical themes, likely due to the close connection of the field of biblical studies with the nascence of Assyriology.

Gilgamesh in science fiction

In my previous volume for the Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World series, *Ishtar*, I noted that Mesopotamian myths and legends seem to appear with exceptional prominence in works of science fiction and fantasy, when compared to other modern works of popular culture. The tendency of the composers and consumers of the genres of science fiction and fantasy to embrace Mesopotamian literary tropes and characters is considered at least partially due to the consumers and producers of these modern genres having a higher "myth literacy" than the general population (Pryke, 2017a).

The broader trend of the appreciation of Mesopotamian myth and legend in science fiction and fantasy can also be observed with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In diverse works such as televisions' *Star Trek* and comic books, the story of Gilgamesh is retold, and the *Epic's* characters are revived and adapted for new contexts. While *Gilgamesh* has only been widely available for use in modern artistic works since the end of

the second World War, the connection between the science fiction and fantasy genres, and *Gilgamesh*, may be much older.

The genre which modern audiences would recognise as science fiction emerged around the time of the 19th century CE, propelled by the social and cultural changes of the industrial revolution. The works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells pioneered the two major modes of science fiction that have dominated the genre from that time; these being the “hard/didactic” and “speculative/fantastic” respectively (Evans, 2009: 13). The genesis of the literary field of science fiction is connected with the development of the science fiction novel, although the genre was popularised in American pulp magazines of the early twentieth century. Yet, it has been argued that the literary tradition of science fiction and fantasy has much more ancient origins. Scholars such as Brian Aldiss have suggested that the fantastical elements of many ancient literary texts permits their inclusion in the “canon” of works in the genre of science fiction and fantasy.

The supernatural and fantastical elements of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have earned it a place in the discourse over the origins and development of science and fiction. In 1972, the French science fiction writer and scholar Pierre Versins noted that the search for eternal life in *Gilgamesh* made it the earliest known work of science fiction (Versins, 1972). This view was also endorsed by the American author, Lester del Rey (1980).

From the time of the earliest written epics, audiences have been captivated by the adventures of heroic protagonists, characters whose abilities and experiences are larger-than-life—or even, perhaps, “super.” The superhero of today owes much to its ancient literary antecedents, and the ancient mythic roots of the “hero’s quest” for modern day comic book heroes has long been acknowledged (Robb, 2014).

Gilgamesh’s place at the beginning of what would later be known as science fiction has been explored by Gunn, who noted that “*Gilgamesh*’s concerns are those of science fiction” (2002: xii). Gunn observed the foreshadowing in *Gilgamesh* of elements typical to later science fiction, such as a partly-divine hero, the attempts at control over elements, the heroic habit of saving people, and even an appreciation of technology in the walls of Uruk (1977: 1.xi, xiii).

The characters and plotlines of ancient myths and epics have been used by Marvel and DC comics, weaving these often-familiar figures into the fabric of new adventures, with a contemporary setting. This connection was noted in several books in the first half of the 20th

century, most famously in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell uses the second-half of Gilgamesh's adventure for an example of an elixir quest—quests which have lost none of their appeal in over four millennia (Campbell, 1949).

Campbell's important role in increasing modern popular engagement with ancient mythology has been noted by Ziolkowski (2011: 113), who gives credit to Campbell for his part in making Gilgamesh “a visible example of the modern quest for identity” (2011: 13). Ziolkowski further notes that Campbell's Freudian-Jungian psychoanalytic approach to Gilgamesh was a notable precursor to the greater awareness of the myth in psychoanalytic studies, which developed more fully in the 1980s (Ziolkowski, 2011: 112).

Similarly to Ziolkowski's assessment of the impact of Campbell, in the same historical period, superhero literature, particularly in the form of American comic books, played a powerful role in reviving popular interest in the ancient “genre” of heroic adventure. The significant role of superhero literature in expanding the awareness of ancient myths continues in the present day, as can be seen with the successful Avengers film franchise.

As one of the world's first heroes, Gilgamesh can be considered as the proto-hero from which all later heroes follow. It is fitting then that Gilgamesh's name and story have become entwined with one of the most prominent sources of heroic deeds in the present day—Marvel comics. Gilgamesh appears in Marvel Comics as one of the Eternals, a group of immortal (or at least, very long-lived) superheroes who are at times mistaken for deities. For some heroes, the connection between the modern and ancient “versions” of characters is more overt than others. The superheroine Wonder Woman from DC Comics, for example, is considered to have some of the closest ties to the Greek and Roman tradition of all modern American superheroes (Darowski and Rush, 2014: 223).

While some modern-day incarnations of ancient protagonists may be faithful to their ancient predecessor in many ways, others may only retain a similarity of name or a few familiar elements. Characters such Wonder Woman blend familiar aspects from the world of ancient myth, such as the Amazons of the Classical world, with modern innovations that reinvent the character for new audiences.

Despite the significant differences in historical and cultural contexts, ancient and modern “superheroes” share an outsized capacity to meet unprecedented challenges, while still retaining (and often battling) their humanity. The superhero “genre” is a medium

with theoretically boundless potential, a place where “anything can and does happen,” yet even in awareness of this unlimited potential, the genre is circumscribed and ordered by certain rules of convention (Brown, 2001: 146).

Gilgamesh the Avenger

Gilgamesh has had a chequered yet impactful career as a hero in comics and graphic novels. The comic-book hero of “Gilgamesh” was created by Jack Kirby, although the character has been employed by numerous authors, notably Roy Thomas. Gilgamesh’s first appearance in a comic was in 1976 (*Eternals* #13), where he is called the “Forgotten One” and is a member of a group called the Eternals. Other Eternals familiar to consumers of ancient myth include Helios, Cybele, and Kronos. The Eternals were superhuman defenders of the earth, who battled against the Deviants. Gilgamesh the superhero is also a member of the Avengers. His character has a close connection with Captain America, who assists Gilgamesh in fighting numerous battles.

Captain America was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in 1939. The character was conceptualised as embodying American ideals of liberty and justice. The embedded nationalism in the fictional superhero can be seen in his name, and his heroic costume, which carries the motif of an American flag.



Figure 7.1 Chris Evans as Captain America and Chris Hemsworth as Thor in

Gilgamesh and Captain America are both presented as characters who stand apart from their own time and cultural context—for Captain America, this is the United States during the 1940s, and for Gilgamesh, ancient Mesopotamia. For both Captain America and Gilgamesh, the hero's character is deeply interwoven with the cultural identity of their home and origins, and they must navigate the world of the present day while still engaging with the traditions of their past.

Gilgamesh the Avenger

In the 1980s and 90s, Gilgamesh appears in the Avengers series as a colleague and friend of Captain America. His first appearance as an Avenger is in *Avengers 1 #300*, "*Inferno Squared*." This volume introduces a new team of the Avengers, including Gilgamesh, who is known, rather aptly, as the "Forgotten One." The "forgetting" of Gilgamesh the hero is referenced in the earlier comic from 1977, where the character Sprite remarks that the hero "lives like an ancient myth, no longer remembered."

Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian #40* "The Fiend from the Forgotten City" from 1974 features the Mesopotamian goddess of love, Inanna. Marvel's Inanna holds similar powers to her mythical counterpart, including the ability to heal. It is interesting to note the prominence of the theme of "forgetting" in comic books involving Mesopotamian myths, perhaps alluding to the present-day obscurity of ancient Mesopotamian culture.

Gilgamesh's costume in the comics is a red and gold smock and a green cape, and on his head he wears the horns of a bull. The costuming of the character shows nice interplay from the writers of the comic with the legendary character and his battle with the Bull of Heaven.

The appearance of Gilgamesh wearing a horned cap is not the only literary connection to his ancient legend. Gilgamesh the comic book character shares a great deal in common with his ancient namesake, including superlative strength and stamina. Gilgamesh uses these abilities to battle monsters alongside Captain America and Thor. Gilgamesh's legend is also used to provide humorous touches amid the action of the Avengers exploits.

Avengers #304 “...Yearning to Breathe Free!”

In Avengers #304, Gilgamesh travels to Ellis Island with Captain America and Thor. While the other two heroes welcome an outing and a chance to relax, Gilgamesh shows characteristic restlessness, phrased with reference to his ancient narrative. Gilgamesh drolly comments that “a trip on the water to a new place can be refreshing, but I wouldn’t want this inaction to last for long!” Although Thor and Gilgamesh are at odds on how to spend their leisure time, the setting of the comic on Ellis Island allows for their thoughtful consideration of their shared past as immigrants. Remarking on the special role of Ellis Island in American history, Captain America notes that he can “feel the history in the walls.” Thor comments on his own status as an immigrant from Asgard, and how he shares “much in spirit” with those who pass through the immigration point. Gilgamesh then notes his own foreign origins, and the “aura of greatness” about Ellis Island despite being “meagre” in comparison to his Eternal home.

The trio then must battle xenophobic enemies and protect the island. Gilgamesh uses his heroic powers to vanquish the enemies, who end up being transported away from the island. The irony of the xenophobic adversaries ending up as immigrants themselves, and transiting through Ellis Island, is noted by Captain America.

Captain America Annual #11

As noted, Gilgamesh participates in various heroic activities as part of the Avengers, and at times the writers make humorous nods to his legendary ancient epic. However, it’s not until the Captain America Annual #11 that Gilgamesh’s character and legend are foregrounded in the narrative. The connection of Gilgamesh to his home in ancient Mesopotamia in the early 90s allows for the consideration in the factors that underlie the modern day reception of Ancient Near Eastern myths and legends. While the development of Captain America, discussed earlier, is closely linked to the political and cultural climate, for Gilgamesh, political concerns may take a back-seat to the appreciation of history and story-telling.

In *Captain America Annual #11*, the battle against villainous Kang sends Captain America time-travelling back to Uruk in 2700 BCE. There he meets Gilgamesh, but this is the ancient king Gilgamesh, who has no awareness of his role as an Avenger or friendship with the

Captain. Captain America slowly realises the identity of his royal companion, and accompanies Gilgamesh on several adventures from the legendary *Epic*.

Textual fluidity?

While showing a great depth of knowledge about the Gilgamesh legend, the writers do not straight-forwardly follow the usual plot points. Instead, some aspects of the plot are reimagined, and at times conflated. Gilgamesh's search for the heartbeat plant at the bottom of the ocean is mixed with his unhappy encounter with the snake who steals his immortality. In the comic adaptation, the snake becomes an angry sea serpent, who Captain America must fight to save Gilgamesh. The Mesopotamian hero's fixation on acquiring immortality is reflected in his character's choice to leave Captain America fighting the serpent in order to collect the herb. This leads Cap to observe his ancient friend has "a few millennia" of catching up to do on the concept of team-work!

In *Captain America Annual* #11, Gilgamesh seeks the secret of eternal life from Utanapishtim—unaware that as a member of the Eternals, he is immortal. This storyline shows thoughtful engagement with Gilgamesh's actions in the ancient epic—Gilgamesh's divine parenthood will eventually give him an elevated role in the afterlife, and it is the qualities he already possesses, rather than the secret of immortality, which shape his eventual role as an underworld deity.

Exploring the comic-book connection of Gilgamesh and Captain America shows the enduring appeal of the world's first tragic hero, with his continued capacity to find new audiences. The friendly bond between Captain America and Gilgamesh could be argued to present a modern spin on one of the world's first epic heroic pairings. As with Enkidu, Gilgamesh's friendship with Captain America shows him encountering a figure with similar strength and stamina, yet with different origins and culture. Fortunately for Captain America, the modern pairing does not end tragically—despite the Mesopotamian hero's occasional disregard for his friend's welfare.

Gilgamesh in literature, music, and theatre

Gilgamesh has also been embraced by artists in a wide range of media. In 1916, the poet Rilke wrote that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was "the

greatest thing one could experience,” perhaps due to a sense of romanticism inspired by the extreme antiquity of the *Epic* (Moran, 1980).

Robert Silverberg showed his continuing fascination with fictionalising events and characters from the Ancient Near East with *Gilgamesh the King* (1984). In Silverberg’s treatment, the story of Gilgamesh is told from the perspective of the young king, in the genre of a historical novel. Dumuzi (Sumerian Tammuz) is given a greater role in the story, and the narrative is presented with a sense of realism that is juxtaposed against the supernatural aspects of the hero’s adventures. The *Epic* was transformed into an acclaimed verse play by Scottish poet Edwin Morgan in 2005.

A version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* involving puppetry was featured in a poetic composition by Miroslav Holub (1982), demonstrating the continued reinvention of the world’s oldest hero in a variety of media. Gilgamesh has been adapted into numerous children’s books, and a successful Manga series. The Manga series *Gilgamesh* was written and illustrated by the well-known artist Shotaro Ishinomori. The series interacts with the characters from the ancient epic, and creatively reimagines the central heroic role by transforming “Gilgamesh” into a group of individuals who work together using special powers.

Gilgamesh has been the subject of several operas and plays, most recently an acclaimed adaptation by Piers Beckley, which was performed at London’s White Bear Theatre (2017). Beckley’s adaptation illuminated the love story between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and was praised for drawing new audiences to the ancient narrative.

In 2015, Iraqi metal band Acrassicauda released their second album, *Gilgamesh*, inspired by the epic poem. The album contains twelve songs reflecting a thoughtful engagement with the themes of the *Gilgamesh* narrative. This engagement is shown through the musicians’ use of the ancient story to reflect on the current political and social environment in Iraq and more broadly, continuing an artistic focus on the topic of war and peace seen in the band’s earlier album, *Only the Dead See the End of the War*, from 2010. Gilgamesh and Enkidu have inspired numerous other compositions in the metal genre.

The themes of mortality and home are also reflected in the debut album of Australian band Gypsy and the Cat, *Gilgamesh* (2010). The title track from the album references the prominence of the hero’s home and his connection with the goddess Ishtar in the narrative, while also poetically reflecting on the timelessness of loving bonds.

Also in 2010, hip hop artist and Baba Brinkman recounted the story of Gilgamesh on his album *Rapconteur*. Brinkman is known for his environmental activism, an interest that aligns well with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and for pioneering the genre of “lit-hop,” a musical genre combining literature and hip-hop. Gilgamesh has appeared in several songs by another hip-hop artist known for political activism, British-Iraqi rapper Lowkey, perhaps most notably “Cradle of Civilisation” (2011).

The American rapper Killah Priest deftly weaves the narrative of Gilgamesh and Enkidu into the lyrics of his song “Lord Marduk,” from the 2013 album *The Psychic World of Walter Reed*. The song gives a transcultural and historical perspective on current areas of social injustice, in a spiritual context. In this way, the creative use of the *Gilgamesh* narrative by Killah Priest reflects the political and religious elements considered to be foundational to the genre of hip-hop, highlighted against an ancient epic which also deeply engages with themes of divinity and justice. The song’s lyrics call attention to the extreme antiquity and brilliance of the *Gilgamesh* narrative, contrasting the epic against other cultural landmarks such as the literature of Homer and the Egyptian pyramids. Killah Priest juxtaposed Gilgamesh along with biblical references on his song “Alien Stars” from the 2015 album *Planet of the Gods*. The composition gives a meditation on wisdom and human limitations that seems fitting in light of the artist’s use of Mesopotamian legend.

Gilgamesh on screen

As discussed earlier, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* holds great appeal for audiences of science fiction and fantasy, and this trend has continued to the ancient hero’s modern incarnation on the silver screen. Gilgamesh has appeared as a character in several popular television series of the science fiction and fantasy genre. These appearances include an episode of *Hercules the Legendary Journeys* and *The Outer Limits*. As well as appearing in a wide variety of medias, the usage of Gilgamesh’s image in modern artistic works shows great diversity.

Star Trek: The Next Generation

Gilgamesh’s willingness to boldly go where no Mesopotamian has gone before makes him a good fit for a television series set in space—the final frontier. The hero’s story is used didactically by Captain

Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) in a fifth season episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1991), titled “Darmok.” The episode thoughtfully explores the themes of the *Epic* and the power of narrative.

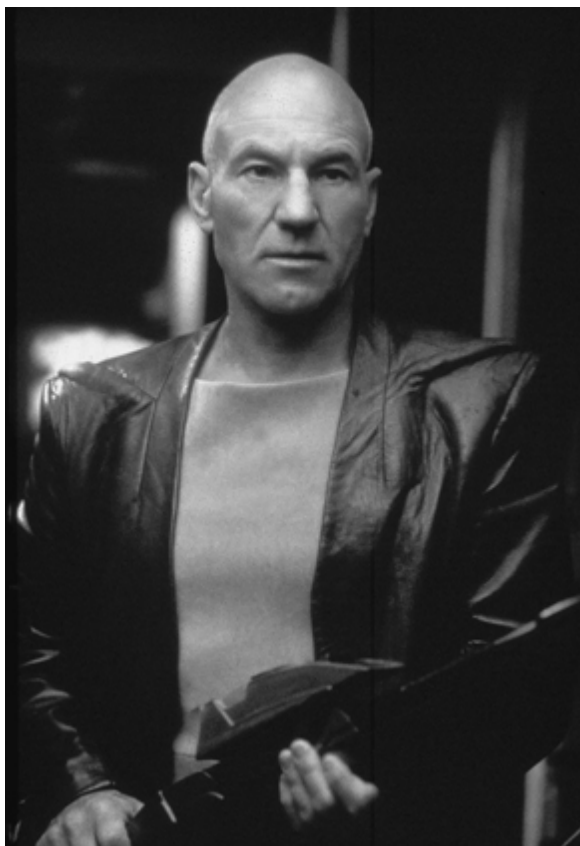


Figure 7.2 *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Patrick Stewart as Captain Jean-Luc Picard. © Paramount/Kobal/Shutterstock.

The aliens who Picard encounters in the episode have an unusual means of communication, requiring the decoding of imagery. This mode of alien communication provides scope for consideration of the importance of narrative and context for drawing meaning from imagery. Although the lack of context for the aliens’ allegories creates barriers to understanding, the desire to communicate and connect, and the universal aspects of the stories, allow a bond to be formed.

The power of story-telling is further emphasised as the captain of the Enterprise and the alien captain exchange details from the epic narratives indigenous to their individual cultures. Picard recounts the story of *Gilgamesh*, beginning by remarking on its extreme antiquity

(even more notable given the episode's 24th-century setting). The epic narrative from the alien culture, compared with *Gilgamesh*, features two individuals, perhaps rivals, who travel to a distant setting and face a "beast," becoming allies in the process and inseparable companions. The episode demonstrates how both cultures frame and interpret their current situation through mythological tropes. In this way, the importance of understanding the stories of a culture to gain an insight into an alien worldview is emphasised.

Events in the episode show some mirroring with *Gilgamesh*, as two former adversaries unite to fight a powerful creature. The battle results in the death of the alien captain, and Picard both mourns and commemorates his lost friend. Picard clearly identifies himself with Gilgamesh, and the alien with Enkidu, and by applying the story to his personal circumstances, the audience gets a clearer view of Picard's inner life. The story concludes with Picard reacquainting himself with the Homeric hymns, with a renewed appreciation for the timeless value of mythology.

Gilgamesh's ventures into space do not end with *Star Trek*. The largest moon of the planet Jupiter has a basin on its crust named for the ancient hero. Gilgamesh's opponent, the Bull of Heaven, also has a lasting home in the night sky, having an enduring association with the constellation now known as Taurus.

Gilgamesh: the journey's end

As one of the world's oldest literary characters, Gilgamesh has created a remarkable legacy through the power and poetry of his story. As much as the heroic king's story is part of his character, so Gilgamesh is indispensably connected to the culture and history of ancient Mesopotamia, both in ancient times, and the modern reception of the civilisation.

Despite a long period of near anonymity, the universality and quality of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has seen it once again elevated to a place of popular fascination in the modern day. New imaginings of the Urukian hero's story can be found across a plethora of artistic media, including television, musical theatre, and even body art.

The rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* by George Smith in 1872 almost immediately had the effect of renewing popular engagement with the ancient epic. From that time, *Gilgamesh* has exerted a modern influence that is difficult to precisely quantify, yet has undoubtedly

and emphatically altered the way that modern audiences view the ancient world, and ancient literature. In the ancient world, as we have seen, *Gilgamesh* was involved in cross-cultural dialogue with the Hebrew Bible and great literary works of the Classical world, such as the Homeric epics. In the present day, his influence has been most clearly seen in the changing appreciation and reception of these ancient works that have played a foundational role in Western civilisation.

At the close of this book, it is clear that *Gilgamesh* contains unlimited treasures for those seeking to explore the world of ancient Mesopotamia. While this volume has attempted to give an overview of important themes and concepts in the *Epic*, the swiftly developing awareness of *Gilgamesh*'s ancient context means we are only at the beginning in terms of our modern appreciation of the breadth and complexity of this ancient masterpiece.

In 2022, it will be 150 years since the rediscovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Like the snake that steals Gilgamesh's rejuvenation plant, the story has aged well. Its universal themes—exploring the tension between the natural and civilised worlds, the potency of true love, and the question of what makes a good life—are as relevant today as they were over 4,000 years ago. Gilgamesh's story will continue to resonate with new audiences long into the future.



Further reading

The readings in this section are intended to present some avenues for further study, and to complement the thematic focus of the book. Assyriological works have developed a reputation for inaccessibility to the non-specialist. In awareness of this, the aim here is to keep the focus in this section on more general and accessible works; the suggestions in this section are not intended to be exhaustive.

Included are a small number of more specialised studies, and one or two in languages other than English, where they are particularly foundational or relevant for a deeper analysis of the themes explored in this book. As we have seen throughout the book, the study of Gilgamesh connects to many areas of Mesopotamian history and culture, therefore this curated selection of suggested readings is broad in scope.

Introduction

To begin to explore the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is important to start with a current translation of the text. For scholarly analyses, the definitive version of the *Epic* is Andrew George's *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (2003). George's work is in two volumes, and unites a new translation with a critical analysis of the text. The modern knowledge of the *Epic* has been enhanced by the addition of the newly deciphered text fragment relating to Gilgamesh's journey to the Cedar Forest. A translation and exegesis of this fragment can be found in Farouk N. H. Al-Rawi and Andrew R. George's 2014 article: "Back to the Cedar Forest: The beginning and end of Tablet V of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgameš," published in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*. A wieldier translation of the *Epic* by George can be found in his previous volume: *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation* (1999a). A combination of commentary and translation of the text is found also in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*,

edited by Benjamin R. Foster (2001). The Introduction of this chapter noted the usefulness of the ETCSL website for sourcing English translations of Sumerian literature, including narratives involving Gilgamesh such as *Gilgamesh and Aga* (ETCSL 1.8.1.1).

To delve more deeply into analyses of the *Epic*, see (notably) *Gilgamesh: A Reader* (1997a), a fascinating study edited by John Maier, containing 25 essays. The development of the *Epic* is analysed in Jeffrey Tigay's *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (1982). The emphasis of these analyses is generally on providing a detailed commentary of specific aspects of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. An excellent starting place to consider the heroic identity of Gilgamesh in the *Epic* and beyond is Tzvi Abusch's article "The Development and Meaning of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: An Interpretive Essay" from 2001. Abusch provides a clear account of the development of the narrative, the themes of the text, and the identity of its hero. Abusch's insightful engagement with the Mesopotamian cultural context and the complexity of the hero's identity has provided the foundations for many later studies, including this volume.

The appreciation of *Gilgamesh* is enhanced through the consideration of the historical and cultural context of ancient Mesopotamia. It seems worthwhile to add some items to this section which facilitate the awareness of Mesopotamian literature and culture more generally. There are several significant studies that explore Mesopotamian literary traditions. Stephanie Dalley's *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (1989) provides a very readable entry point to the world of Akkadian myth. Two anthologies, one by Benjamin R. Foster (*Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2005a) and the other from Thorkild Jacobsen (*The Harps That Once Sounded: Sumerian Poetry in Translation*, 1987), present a great variety of textual evidence in translation, with some commentary. An excellent introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature by leading scholars is *From an Antique Land: An Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, edited by Carl S. Ehrlich (2009), containing a chapter-length overview of Akkadian literature by Benjamin R. Foster.

To gain an overview of the social and economic life in the Ancient Near East, Daniel C. Snell's *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100–332 B.C.E* gives a detailed introduction with emphasis on the ancient sources. To assist in the consideration of the cultural history surrounding the Gilgamesh narratives, two recent publications combine informed analysis with a readable style: Benjamin R. Foster's

The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia (2016), and Marten Stol's *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2016). I would further recommend *The Sumerian World* (2013), edited by Harriet Crawford, and *The Babylonian World* (2009), edited by Gwendolyn Leick. A further very useful work is *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, an encyclopaedic four-volume work, edited by Jack M. Sasson (1995).

Chapter 1: Kingship

The role of the Mesopotamian king incorporated serious religious responsibilities. For almost half a century, the initial reference point for students of Mesopotamian religion was Thorkild Jacobsen's *The Treasures of Darkness* (1976). More recently, overviews of Mesopotamian religion may be found (in English) in Jean Bottéro's *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2001), Ivan Hruša's *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: A Descriptive Introduction* (2015), and in the collection of selected essays by W. G. Lambert in *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology* (2016). An excellent article by Michael B. Hundley from 2013 "Here a God, There a God: An Examination of the Divine in Ancient Mesopotamia" provides a neat overview.

Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond (2008), edited by Nicole Brisch, is an excellent reference for considerations around the complexities of Mesopotamian kingship. A helpful overview of scholarship on divinity and Mesopotamian kingship, as well as an explanation of some of the main problems, can be found in Nicole Brisch's 2013 article, "Of Gods and Kings: Divine Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia." A useful resource on the topic of kingship is *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority: Cosmos, Politics, and the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia* (2013), edited by Jane A. Hill, Philip Jones, and Antonio J. Morales.

Chapter 2: Gilgamesh: warrior and hero

The concept of "pacificism" in ancient Mesopotamia has been explored in a chapter by Benjamin R. Foster "Water under the Straw: Peace in Mesopotamia," in the 2007 volume, *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, edited by K. Raaflaub. The cross-cultural focus of Raaflaub's edited work is also seen in the 2014 book by Mark S. Smith *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* (2014). This book compares "poetic heroes" across

several Ancient Near Eastern civilisations. By drawing comparisons between heroic figures from diverse historical contexts, Smith provides a thorough and interesting exploration of the portrayal of warrior culture in ancient literature.

The changing attitudes and approaches to writing martial histories of the Ancient Near East may be explored through reading Seth Richardson's 2011 article, "Mesopotamia and the 'New' Military History. Recent Directions," in *The Military History of the Ancient World*, edited by L. L. Brice and J. T. Roberts. This article provides a fantastic introduction to the topic of warfare in ancient Mesopotamia, combining highly nuanced observations with broader overviews on recent issues.

Returning our focus to Mesopotamia, Andrew George's contribution to the 2013 volume *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*, edited by Hugh Kennedy, considers the portrait of war presented in Babylonian literature. In his chapter "The poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian Poet's View of War," George notes the tendency of Mesopotamian epics to reflect upon the human condition, and presents the poem *Erra and Ishum* as a poetic denunciation of war. The great diversity in Mesopotamian representations of the "hero" has been recently explored in Jean-Marie Durand, Thomas Römer, and Michael Langlois (eds.), *Le jeune héros. Recherches sur la formation et la diffusion d'un thème littéraire au Proche-Orient ancien*, 2011.

Chapter 3: Animality and ecology

The study of the themes of animality and ecology in Mesopotamian literature is an exciting area of developing scholarship. A good starting point is *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, edited by B. J. Collins (2002), and particularly relevant to the subject of this book is the chapter by Benjamin R. Foster "Animals in Mesopotamian Literature." From the same year, the reader may be well directed to *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia*, edited by C. E. Watanabe. An important overview of ecology in ancient Mesopotamian literature can be found in Stephanie Dalley's chapter, "The Natural World in Ancient Mesopotamian Literature," in *A Global History of Literature and the Environment* (2016), edited by John Parham and Louise Westling. The narrative presentation of wilderness spaces has been considered in Laura Feldt's article, "Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mountain

Wilderness in Old Babylonian Religious Narratives” (2016).

Relating more specifically to the subject of ecology and animality in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is the 2002 article by P. Barron “The Separation of Wild Animal Nature and Human Nature in Gilgamesh: Roots of a Contemporary Theme.” Barron thoughtfully explores the duality of animality and humanity in Gilgamesh, and how this theme shapes the characterisation of the *Epic*’s protagonists in the narrative. The topic is also considered in detail in Wayne Horowitz’s book *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (1998), especially in chapter 5: “Gilgamesh and the Distant Reaches of the Earth’s Surface.” The conception of “nature” in the Mesopotamian world has been the subject of the 2016 volume *Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science*, by Francesca Rochberg.

Chapter 4: Love and family

Any discussion on the role of women in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* must begin with acknowledging the innovative work of Rivkah Harris. Citing inspiration from the legendary scholar, William L. Moran, Harris applied the tools of literary criticism to survey the images of women in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Harris’s “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” appeared in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, edited by Tzvi Abusch. Harris gave the subject of women a more expansive treatment in her book *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature* (2000). In this book, Harris expanded her focus to considering not just the contrast between “masculine” and “feminine” genders but between different age groups as well. Tzvi Abusch has provided a selection of essays on the topic of gender in Gilgamesh in *Male and Female in the Epic of Gilgamesh: Encounters, Literary History, and Interpretation* (2015).

For further exploration of the general themes of women and gender in ancient Mesopotamia, see Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* (2002), in two volumes, *La Femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique* (1987), edited by Jean-Marie Durand; *Women in the Ancient Near East: A Sourcebook* (2014), edited by Mark Chavalas; and Marten Stol’s *Women in the Ancient Near East* (2016). Zainab Bahrani’s *Women of Babylon* (2001) provides a detailed insight into gender and sexuality in literature, including analysis of the artistic sources for Mesopotamian women. The portrayal of divine

women has been considered in Asher-Greve, Julia M. and Joan Goodnick Westenholz (eds.), *Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources*, 2013.

The topic of love in Gilgamesh, and its connection to wisdom, has been explored by Benjamin R. Foster in his chapter “Gilgamesh: Sex, Love, and the Ascent of Knowledge,” in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East*, edited by John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (1987). The relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu receives a detailed analysis in Susan Ackerman’s *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (2005), where Ackerman examines the coherency of the eroticism of the *Epic*. Ackerman’s volume is also useful for its review of the main scholarly responses to the issue of defining the relationship of Enkidu and Gilgamesh in recent times. An excellent overview of homosexuality in the Ancient Near East may be found in *L’homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible*, by Thomas Römer and Loyse Bonjour (originally published in 2005, now see the revised version from 2016).

Chapter 5: Wisdom and civilisation

A clear and comprehensive overview of the scholarly debate over the definition of Mesopotamian “wisdom literature” can be found in the introductory chapters of Yoram Cohen’s *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age* (2013), edited by Andrew George. This work provides a collection of texts from the Ancient Near East from the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500–1200 BCE). These works chronologically follow the earlier Sumerian wisdom literature and the early Akkadian compositions from the Old Babylonian Period.

The meaning of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been given serious consideration by several scholars, and a small sample of these works are listed here as a potential starting point from which to dive into this abyssopelagic topic. Andrew George considers the intersection of meaning and genre in Gilgamesh in his 2007 chapter “The Epic of Gilgamesh: thoughts on Genre and Meaning,” in the proceedings from the 2004 Gilgamesh conference *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria*, edited by Noel K. Weeks and Joseph J. Azzize. Tzvi Abusch has considered the changing meanings of Gilgamesh’s narratives in their many forms in his 2001 paper “The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay.”

When exploring the topic of death in Mesopotamia, there is no better place to begin than with a survey of the works of Dina Katz, notably the 2005 article “Death They Dispensed to Mankind: The Funerary World of Ancient Mesopotamia,” and her entries on death (“Tod A”) and the underworld (“Unterwelt A”) in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 14 (2014a and 2014b). The connection between Gilgamesh and death, particularly in his role as a judge of the underworld, has been comprehensively explored by Andrew George in the first volume of his book *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (2003). The Sumerian narrative of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, and its literary context in the ancient world, is the focus of Alhena Gadotti’s *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld and the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle* (2014), a revised version of Gadotti’s doctoral dissertation.

The Sumerian myth of *The Death of Gilgamesh* was published by Antoine Cavigneaux and Farouk Al-Rawi in their volume: *Gilgameš et la mort: textes de Tell Haddad VI: avec un appendice sur les textes funéraires sumériens* (2000). An English version of the myth was included in Andrew George’s *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1999a). A new reconstruction of the narrative by Niek Veldhuis appeared in 2001. In this review article, “The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Bilgames’ Death,” Veldhuis gives a new translation and presents a previously unrecognised fragment relating to the text.

Chapter 7: Reception and influence

The discovery and reception of the *Gilgamesh Epic* rivals the ancient narrative itself as a fascinating area of study. The development of the *Epic* has been carefully detailed in Jeffrey Tigay’s *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (1982). Tigay’s revised PhD thesis has been credited with changing the course of studies relating to *Gilgamesh* (Maier, 1997: 40). A summarised version of Tigay’s work is contained in *Gilgamesh: A Reader* (1997), edited by John Maier.

Theodore Ziolkowski’s *Gilgamesh among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic* (2011) gives a thorough and highly readable account of the modern reception of the *Epic*, beginning with its rediscovery by George Smith in 1884 and continuing through to the 21st century. Ziolkowski considers the impact of the *Epic*’s rediscovery on a variety of

media and audiences. An in-depth account of the cultural and temporal context surrounding the *Epic's* rediscovery, and the influence of these unique conditions on the reception of Gilgamesh's narrative can be found in *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative and the Historical Sublime in Victorian Culture* (2013), by Vybarr Cregan-Reid.

The comparison of biblical and Ancient Near Eastern texts has been a crucial part of the reception of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and functioned as the subject of several books. A good place to start is Irving Finkel's erudite volume *The Ark before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (2014), which presents the story and context of ancient Flood narratives in a manner that is both highly accessible and learned.

Focused on the Book of Genesis is *I Studied Inscriptions Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, edited by Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (1994). For the Flood narratives, see Y. S. Chen *The Primeval Flood Catastrophe: Origins and Early Developments in Sumerian and Babylonian Traditions* (2013).

Despite the many developments in Assyriological research which had occurred prior to the rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* in 1872, the appearance of the *Epic* had an unprecedented impact. The effect of this impact on the image and understanding of the Bible has been explored by Bottéro *Naissance de Dieu. La Bible et l'historien* (1986).

A great variety of materials relating Assyriology and Biblical Studies, across several periods, is found in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (2002), edited by Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. This volume of collected essays is the expanded proceedings of a 1994 meeting of the Near Eastern Archaeological Society. The book's opening chapter is written by Mark W. Chavalas, and titled "Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century of Tension." As the chapter's name suggests, the opening essay gives a thoughtful overview of the often controversial relations between Assyriology and Biblical Studies. This topic receives more expansive treatment in the 2007 volume *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, edited by Steven W. Holloway. The book considers the historiography of the interaction between Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Studies, as well as giving close attention to significant points in the development of the field of Assyriology.

The scholarly exploration of the Ancient Near Eastern background for many Classical literary works (and religious practices) has been a lively and growing area of study for at least the last twenty years. Comparisons involving Mesopotamian religion and literature with

biblical and classical traditions have both assisted in the growth of Assyriology as an academic discipline and influenced the course of its development, issues that are the subject of detailed analysis in *The Legacy of Mesopotamia* (1998), edited by Stephanie Dalley. Walter Burkert's *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (1992), and M. L. West's *The East Face of Helicon: West Asian Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (1997) are frequently cited for their radical redefinition of scholarly thinking on the issues surrounding cross-cultural influences in ancient traditions. The original German version of Burkert's volume, released in 1984, is considered the starting point for contemporary reflections on the relationship between Greek and Ancient Near Eastern sources by Bremmer (2008: x), who notes further that the publication of the English version was much more influential on the academic discourse. Despite the long history of considering Mesopotamian culture in light of other ancient traditions, this remains a rich field of study with much still to be established; the problems in attempting to find connections between the ancient Near Eastern and classical worlds have been discussed by Scott Noegel in *A Companion to Greek Religion* (2007a).



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Glossary

This brief glossary lists some useful terms that appear in this book. When listing deities that have differing Sumerian and Semitic names, I give the Sumerian version first. The family relations noted here show some variability in different periods and traditions. Spelling differences in names that appear in quoted text throughout the book reflect the use of translations.

Adapa:	“Wise-man” of Eridu, hero of the narrative <i>Adapa and the South Wind</i> .
Akkadian:	Ancient Semitic language, written in the cuneiform script.
An/Anu:	Mesopotamian sky deity, father of Ishtar and Shamash.
The Apsu:	Ea’s watery domain, and the location of the herb of immortality in <i>Gilgamesh</i> .
Balbale:	A type of literary composition involving lamentations.
Bull of Heaven:	Cosmic warrior, connected to the constellation of Taurus. Killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, while in the service of Ishtar.
Cuneiform:	Ancient writing script from the Ancient Near East. Written by impressing a stylus into a clay tablet, either forming a line or a “wedge-shape” from which the script receives its modern name.
Enki/Ea:	Mesopotamian deity of wisdom.
Enkidu:	Heroic companion of Gilgamesh.
Enlil:	One of the primary Mesopotamian deities. Often described as “king” or “supreme lord.”
Enmerkar:	Legendary king of Uruk, hero of Sumerian narratives such as <i>Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta</i> , and <i>Enmerkar and Ensukheshdanna</i> .
Ereshkigal:	Queen of the underworld, sister of Inanna/Ishtar.

Eridu:	Ancient Mesopotamian city often noted as the source of kingship. Located in modern day southern Iraq, known as Abu Shahrain.
<i>Erra Epic:</i>	A Babylonian poetic composition, ascribed to Kabti-ilani-Marduk. The narrative recounts the destructive actions of the war deity, Erra.
Etana:	Legendary Mesopotamian king of Kish. Travels on the back of an Eagle in the <i>Etana Epic</i> .
Gilgamesh:	Legendary king of Uruk and hero of the <i>Gilgamesh Epic</i> .
Huwawa/Humbaba:	Forest guardian who lives in the Cedar Forest. Depicted in art as a frontally-presented grinning face. Killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.
Inanna/Ishtar:	Primary Mesopotamian goddess of love, war, and social connections.
Kish:	Important city in the political life of ancient Sumer. Its remains lie in modern day central Iraq.
<i>kuzbu:</i>	Akkadian word for sexual magnetism.
<i>Lahmu:</i>	Mythical being depicted in Mesopotamian art and literature, presented in a variety of types. The name means “hairy one,” and <i>lahmu</i> is often presented as a bearded figure wrestling wild creatures.
<i>Lamassu:</i>	Mythical creatures often seen in Mesopotamian art, thought to have an apotropaic effect. Often depicted with a bovine or leonine body, the wings of an eagle and a human head.
Lugalbanda:	Mesopotamian hero featuring in narratives such as <i>Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave</i> and <i>Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird</i> . Figure most commonly identified as Gilgamesh’s father.
The ME:	Collection of fundamental ordinances necessary for the continuation and maintenance of universal order.
Naram-Sin:	Grandson of Sargon of Akkad who ruled the Akkadian Empire from 2254–2218 bce. Protagonist of several narratives including the <i>Cuthean Legend</i> and <i>The Siege of Apishal</i> .
Ninsumun/Ninsun:	Gilgamesh’s divine mother. Also known as ‘Lady Wild Cow.’
Nissaba:	Goddess of writing, wisdom, and cereal

Sargon of Akkad:	grains. King and empire-builder who united northern and southern Mesopotamia.
Scorpion People:	Half-human, half-scorpion hybrid guardians who protect the Path of the Sun.
Shamhat:	Wise prostitute who leads Enkidu through the process of civilisation.
Shulgi of Ur:	King of the Third Dynasty of Ur, son of Ur-Nammu.
Shuruppak:	Sumerian city in modern day southern Iraq, now called Fara. Home of Utanapishtim. Also the name of the wise king who gives advice in the <i>Instructions of Shuruppak</i> .
Siduri:	Wisdom deity and tavern keeper. Advises Gilgamesh.
Sinleqiunnini:	A priest and scribe from the second half of the second millennium. Sin-leqi-unnini is an historical figure who lived in Uruk and had a significant contribution to shaping the Standard Babylonian Version of the <i>Gilgamesh Epic</i> .
Stone Ones:	Mysterious crew of Ur-Shanabi's boat. Smashed by Gilgamesh.
Sumerian:	An ancient language written in cuneiform, considered among the earliest known languages. Thought to be unrelated to any other known language.
Ur-Nammu:	King of Third Dynasty of Ur, author of legal code.
Ur-Shanabi:	Boatman who ferries Gilgamesh across the Waters of Death.
Uruk:	Southern Mesopotamian city, home of Gilgamesh. Considered to be one of the most important archaeological sites of Mesopotamia (Bienkowski and Millard, 2000: 312). Known in the Bible as the city of Erech, and modern day Warka.
Utanapishtim:	Legendary Flood survivor, lives beyond the Path of the Sun and the Waters of Death. Granted immortality after the Flood.
Utu/Shamash:	Mesopotamian sun deity, strongly connected to justice. Protector and counsellor to Gilgamesh.



Timeline

This timeline is intended to give a very general sense of the main periods of Mesopotamian history and stages in Gilgamesh's literary journey—dates should not be considered as absolute.

ca. 5500–4000 BCE Ubaid

4000–2600 BCE Archaic

- Mid-to-late fourth millennium: first attested text from Uruk

2600–2340 BCE Early Dynastic III

2340–2100 BCE Sargonic (Old Akkadian, Gutian)

- Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279) creates the first politically unified Mesopotamian state.

2100–2000 BCE Ur III

- Possible date of composition of Sumerian Gilgamesh stories, with copies dated to the Old Babylonian period.
- End of third millennium: Sumerian disappears as a living language

2000–1600 BCE Isin-Larsa, Old Babylonian 1950–1750 BCE Old Assyrian

- 18th century BCE Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh*

1600–1100 BCE Middle Babylonian/Kassite 1500–1000 BCE Middle Assyrian

- Middle Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*

1000–539 BCE Neo-Babylonian 1000–600 BCE Neo-Assyrian

- 1100 BCE Sin-leqi-unninni composes the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*
- Ninth–eighth centuries BCE: Earliest known copies of the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*
- 130 CE: Last dated manuscript of the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh*

539 BCE–first century CE

- First century CE sees virtual disappearance of Mesopotamian culture, along with use of cuneiform script

Late 19th century CE

- Cuneiform rediscovered and deciphered
- 1872 George Smith of the British Museum translates part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, rekindling awareness of the ancient hero



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